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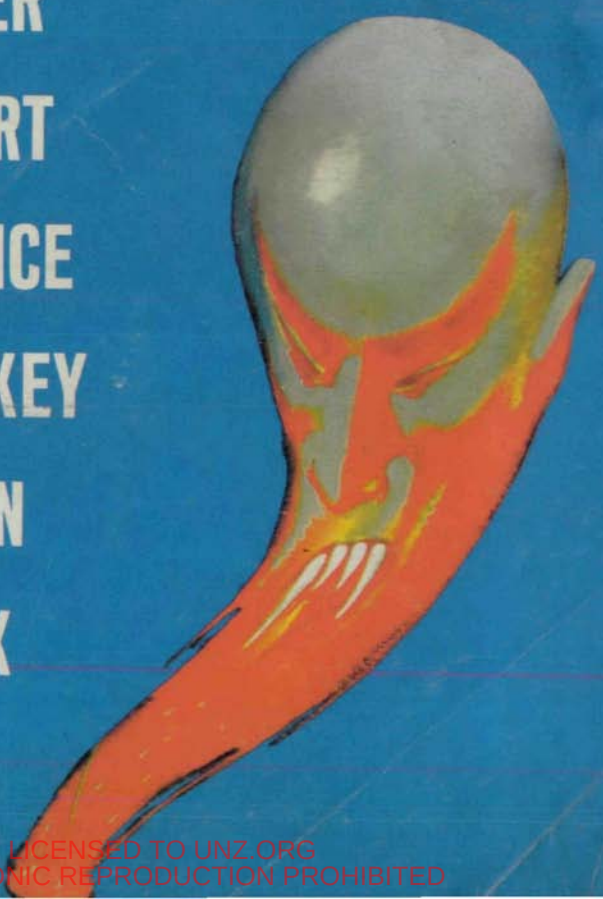

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GREAT
SCIENCE FICTION

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To the god-crazed crowd there was no was happening—the divine Issek

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question about what was among them!

If you ran a popular enough religion, there was money in it. And for money, men took risks, especially when there were . . .

LEAN TIMES IN LANKHMAR

By FRITZ LEIBER

ONCE upon a time in Lankhmar, City of the Black Toga, in the world of Nehwon, two years after the Year of the Feathered Death, Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser parted their ways.

Exactly what caused the tall brawling barbarian and the slim elusive Prince of Thieves to fall out, and the mighty adventuring partnership to be broken, is uncertainly known and was at the time the subject of much speculation. Some said they had quarreled over a girl. Others maintained, with even greater unlikelihood, that they had disagreed over the

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proper division of a loot of jewels raped from Muulsh the Moneylender. Srith of the Scrolls suggests that their mutual cooling off was largely the reflection of a supernatural enmity existing at the time between Sheelba of the Eyeless Face, Fafhrd's demonic one-time mentor, and Ningauble of the Seven Eyes, the Mouser's alien and multiserpentine patron.

The likeliest explanation, which runs directly counter to the Muulsh Hypothesis, is simply that times were hard in Lankhmar, adventures few and uninviting, and that the two heroes had reached that point in life when hard-pressed men desire to admix even the rarest quests and pleasurings with certain prudent activities leading either to financial or to spiritual security, though seldom if ever to both.

This theory—that boredom and insecurity, and a difference of opinion as to how these dismal feelings might best be dealt with, chiefly underlay the estrangement of the twain . . . this theory may account for and perhaps even subsume the otherwise ridiculous suggestion that the two comrades fell out over the proper spelling of Fafhrd's name, the Mouser perversely favoring a simple Lankhmarian equivalent of "Faferd" while the name's owner insisted that only the original mouth-filling agglomeration of consonants could continue to satisfy his ear and eye and his semi-literate, barbarous sense of the fitness of things. Bored and insecure men will loose arrows at dust motes.

Certain it is that their friendship, though not utterly fractured, grew very cold and that their life-ways, though both continuing in Lankhmar, diverged remarkably.

The Gray Mouser entered the service of one Pulg, a rising racketeer of small religions, a lord of Lankhmar's dark underworld who levied tribute from the priests of all godlets seeking to become gods—on pain of various unpleasant, disturbing and revolting things happening at future services of the defaulting godlet. If a priest didn't pay Pulg, his miracles were sure to misfire, his congregation and collection would fall off sharply, and it was quite possible that a bruised skin and broken bones would be his lot.

Accompanied by three or four of Pulg's bullies and frequently a slim dancing girl or

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two, the Mouser became a familiar and newly-ominous sight in Lankhmar's Street of the Gods, which leads from the Marsh Gate to the distant docks and the Citadel. He still wore gray, went close-hooded, and carried Cat's Claw and Scalpel at his side, but the dagger and slim curving sword kept in their sheaths. Knowing from of old that a threat is generally more effective than its execution, he limited his activities to the handling of conversations and cash. "I speak for Plug—Plug with a *guh!*" was his usual opening. Later, if holy men grew recalcitrant or overly keen in their bargaining and it became necessary to maul saintlets and break up services, he would sign the bullies to take these disciplinary measures while he himself stood idly by, generally in slow sardonic converse with the attendant girl or girls and often munching sweetmeats. As the months passed, the Mouser grew fat and the dancing girls successively more child-slim and submissive-eyed.

Fafhrd, on the other hand, broke his longsword across his knee (cutting himself badly in the act), tore from his garments the few remaining ornaments (dull worthless scraps of base metal) and bits of ratty fur, foreswore strong drink and all allied pleasures (he had been on small beer and womanless for some time), and became the sole acolyte of Bwadres, the sole priest of Issek of the Jug. Fafhrd let his beard grow until it was as long as his shoulder-brushing hair, he became lean and hollow-cheeked and cavern-eyed, and his voice changed from bass to tenor, though *not* as a result of the distressing mutilation which some whispered he had inflicted upon himself—these last knew he had cut himself but lied wildly as to where.

The gods *in* Lankhmar (that is, the gods and candidates for divinity who dwell or camp, it may be said, in the Imperishable City, not the gods *of* Lankhmar—a very different and most secret and dire matter) . . . the gods in Lankhmar sometimes seem as if they must be as numberless as the grains of sand in the Great Eastern Desert. The vast majority of them began as men, or more strictly the memories of men who led ascetic, vision-haunted lives and died painful, messy deaths. One gets the impression that since the beginning of time an unending horde of their

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priests and apostles (or even the gods themselves, it makes little difference) have been crippling across that same desert, the Sinking Land, and the Great Salt Marsh to converge on Lankhmar's low, heavy-arched Marsh Gate—meanwhile suffering by the way various inevitable tortures, castrations, blindings and stonings, impalements, crucifixions, quarterings and so forth at the hands of eastern brigands and Mingol unbelievers who, one is tempted to think, were created solely for the purpose of seeing to the running of that cruel gantlet. Among the tormented holy throng are a few warlocks and witches seeking infernal immortality for their dark satanic would-be deities and a very few proto-goddesses—generally maidens reputed to have been enslaved for decades by sadistic magicians and ravished by whole tribes of Mingols.

Lankhmar itself and especially the earlier-mentioned street serves as the theatre or more precisely the intellectual and artistic testing-ground of the proto-gods after their more material but no more cruel sifting at the hands of the brigands and Mingols. A new god (his priest or priests, that is) will begin at the Marsh Gate and more or less slowly work his way up the Street of the Gods, renting a temple or preempting a few yards of cobbled pavement here and there, until he has found his proper level. A very few win their way to the region adjoining the Citadel and join the aristocracy of the gods *in* Lankhmar — transients still though resident there for centuries and even millennia (the gods *of* Lankhmar are as jealous as they are secret). Far more godlets, it can justly be said, play a one-night-stand near the Marsh Gate and then abruptly disappear, perhaps to seek cities where the audiences are less critical. The majority work their way about halfway up the Street of the Gods and then slowly work their way down again, resisting bitterly every inch and yard, until they once more reach the Marsh Gate and vanish forever from Langhmar and the memories of men.

Now Issek of the Jug, whom Fafhrd chose to serve, was one of the most lowly and unsuccessful of the gods, godlets rather, in Lankhmar. He had dwelt there for about thirteen years, during which time he had traveled only two

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squares up the Street of the Gods and was now back at the Marsh Gate again, ready for oblivion. He is not to be confused with Issek the Armless, Issek of the Burnt Legs, Flayed Issek, or any other of the numerous and colorfully mutilated divinities of that name. Indeed, his unpopularity may have been due in part to the fact that the manner of his death—racking—was not deemed particularly spectacular. A few scholars have confused him with Jugged Issek, an entirely different saintlet whose claim to immortality lay in his confinement for seventeen years in a not overly roomy earthenware jar. The Jug (Issek of the Jug's Jug) was supposed to contain Waters of Peace from the Cistern of Cillivat—but none apparently thirsted for them. Indeed, had you sought for a good example of a has-been god who had never really been anything, you could hardly have hit on a better choice then Issek of the Jug, while Bwadres was the very type of the failed priest—sere, senile, apologetic and mumbling. The reason that Fafhrd attached himself to Bwadres, rather than to any one of a vast number of livelier holy men with better prospects, was that he had once seen Bwadres pat a deaf-and-dumb child on the head *while* (so far as Bwadres could have known) *no one was looking* and the incident (possibly unique in Lankhmar) had stuck in the mind of the barbarian. But otherwise Bwadres was a most unexceptional old dodderer.

However, after Fafhrd became his acolyte, things somehow began to change.

In the first place, and even if he had contributed nothing else, Fafhrd made a very impressive one-man congregation from the very first day when he turned up so ragged-looking and bloody (from the cuts got breaking his longsword). His near seven-foot height and still warlike carriage stood out mountainously among the old women, children and assorted riff-raff who made up the odorous, noisy, and vastly fickle crowd of worshippers at the Marsh-Gate end of the Street of the Gods. One could not help thinking that if Issek of the Jug could attract one such worshipper the godlet must have unsuspected virtues. Fafhrd's formidable height, shoulder-breadth and bearing had one other advantage: he could maintain claim to a very respectable area of cobbles

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for Bwadres and Issek merely by stretching himself out to sleep on them after the night's services were over.

It was at this time that oafs and ruffians stopped elbowing Bwadres and spitting on him. Fafhrd was most pacific in his new personality —after all, Issek of the Jug was notably a godlet of peace —but Fafhrd had a fine barbaric feeling for the proprieties. If anyone took liberties with Bwadres or disturbed the various rituals of Issek-worship, he would find himself lifted up and set down somewhere else, with an admonitory *thud* if that seemed called for—a sort of informal one-stroke bastinado.

Bwadres himself brightened amazingly as a result of this wholly unexpected respite granted him and his divinity on the very brink of oblivion. He began to eat more often than twice a week and to comb his long skimpy beard. Soon his senility dropped away from him like an old cloak, leaving of itself only a mad stubborn gleam deep in his yellowly crust-edged eyes, and he began to preach the gospel of Issek of the Jug with a fervor and confidence that he had never shown before.

Meanwhile Fafhrd, in the second place, fairly soon began to contribute more to the promotion of the Issek-of-the-Jug cult than his size, presence, and notable talents as a chucker-out. After two months of self-imposed absolute silence, which he refused to break even to answer the simplest questions of Bwadres, who was at first considerably puzzled by his gigantic convert, Fafhrd procured a small broken lyre, repaired it, and began regularly to chant the Creed and History of Issek of the Jug at all services. He competed in no way with Bwadres, never chanted any of the litanies or presumed to bless in Issek's name, in fact he always kneeled and resumed silence while serving Bwadres as acolyte, but seated on the cobbles at the foot of the service area while Bwadres meditated between rituals at the head, he would strike melodious chords from his tiny lyre and chant away in a rather high-pitched, pleasing, romantically vibrant voice.

Now as a Northerner boy in the Cold Waste, far poleward of Lankhmar across the Inner Sea, the forested Land of the Eight Cities and the Trollstep Mountains, Fafhrd had been trained in the

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School of the Singing Skalds (so called, although they chanted rather than sang, because they pitched their voices tenor) rather than in the School of the Roaring Skalds (who pitched their voices base). This resumption of a childhood-inculcated style of elocution, which he also used in answering the few questions his humility would permit him to notice, was the real and sole reason for the change in Fafhrd's voice that was made the subject of gossip by those who had known him as the Gray Mouser's deep-voiced swordmate.

As delivered over and over by Fafhrd, the History of Issek of the Jug gradually altered, by small steps which even Bwadres could hardly cavil at had he wished, into something considerably more like the saga of a northern hero, though toned down in some respects. Issek had not slain dragons and other monsters as a child—that would have been against his Creed—he had only sported with them, swimming with leviathan, frisking with behemoth, and flying through the trackless spaces of air on the backs of wivern, griffin and hippogryph. Nor had Issek as a man scattered kings and emperors in battle, he had merely dumbfounded them and their quaking ministers by striding about on fields of poisoned sword-points, standing at attention in fiery furnaces, and treading water in tanks of boiling oil—the while delivering majestic sermons on brotherly love in perfect, intricately rhymed stanzas.

Bwadres' Issek had expired quite quickly, though with some kindly parting admonitions, after being disjointed on the rack. Fafhrd's Issek (now *the* Issek) had broken seven racks before he began seriously to weaken. Even when, supposedly dead, he had been loosed and had got his hands on the chief torturer's throat there had been enough strength remaining in them alone so that he had been able to strangle the wicked man with ease, although the latter was a champion of wrestlers among his people. However, Fafhrd's Issek had not done so—again it would have been quite against his Creed—he had merely broken the torturer's thick brass band of office from around his trembling neck and twisted it into an exquisitely beautiful symbol of the Jug before finally permitting his own ghost to escape from him into the eternal realms of spirit, there to con-

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tinue its wildly wonderful adventurings.

Now since the vast majority of the gods in Lankhmar, arising from the Eastern Lands or at least from the kindredly decadent southern country around Quarmall, had been in their earthly incarnations rather effete types, unable to bear more than a few minutes of hanging or a few hours of impalement, and with relatively little resistance to molten lead or showers of barbed darts, also not given overly to composing romantic poetry or to dashing exploits with strange beasts, it is hardly to be wondered that Issek of the Jug, as interpreted by Fafhrd, swiftly won and held the attention and soon thereafter also the devotion of a growing section of the usually unstable, gods-dazzled mob. In particular the vision of Issek of the Jug rising up with his rack, striding about with it on his back, breaking it, and then calmly waiting with arms voluntarily stretched above his head until another rack could be readied and attached to him . . . that vision, in particular, came to occupy a place of prime importance in the dreams and daydreams of many a porter, beggar, drab scullion, and the brats and aged dependents of such.

As a result of this popularity, Issek of the Jug was soon not only moving up the Street of the Gods for a second time —a rare enough feat in itself —but also moving at a greater velocity than any god had been known to attain in the modern era. Almost every service saw Bwadres and Fafhrd able to move their simple altar a few more yards toward the Citadel end as their swelling congregations overflowed areas temporarily sacred to gods of less drawing power, and frequently late-coming and untirable worshippers enabled them to keep up services until the sky was reddening with the dawn—ten or twelve repetitions of the ritual (and the yardage gain) in one night. Before long the make-up of their congregations had begun to change. Pursed and then fatter-pursed types showed up: mercenaries and merchants, sleek thieves and minor officials, jeweled courtesans and slumming aristocrats, shaven philosophers who scoffed lightly at Bwadres' tangled arguments and Issek's irrational Creed but who were secretly awed by the apparent sincerity of the ancient man and his giant poetical acolyte

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. . . and with these monied newcomers came, inevitably, the iron-tough hirelings of Pulg and other such hawks circling over the fowlyards of religion.

Naturally enough, this threatened to pose a considerable problem for the Gray Mouser.

So long as Issek, Bwadres and Fafhrd stayed within hooting range of the Marsh Gate, there was nothing to worry about. There when collection time came and Fafhrd circled the congregation with cupped hands, the take, if any, was in the form of moldy crusts, common vegetables past their prime, rags, twigs, bits of charcoal, and—very rarely, giving rise to shouts of wonder—bent and dinted greenish coins of brass. Such truck was below the notice of even lesser racketeers than Pulg, and Fafhrd had no trouble whatever in dealing with the puny and dull-witted types who sought to play Robber King in the Marsh Gate's shadow. More than once the Mouser managed to advise Fafhrd that this was an ideal state of affairs and that any considerable further progress of Issek up the Street of the Gods could lead only to great unpleasantness. The Mouser was nothing if not cautious and most prescient to boot. He liked, or firmly believed he liked, his newly-achieved security almost better than he liked himself. He knew that, as a recent hireling of Pulg, he was still being watched closely by the Great Man and that any appearance of continuing friendship with Fafhrd (for most outsiders thought they had quarreled irrevocably) might some day be counted against him. So on the occasions when he drifted down the Street of the Gods during off-hours—that is, by daylight, for religion is largely a nocturnal, torchlit business in Lankhmar—he would never seem to speak to Fafhrd directly. Nevertheless he would by seeming accident end up near Fafhrd and, while apparently engaged in some very different private business or pleasure (or perhaps come secretly to gloat over his large enemy's fallen estate—that was the Mouser's second line of defense against conceivable accusations by Pulg) he would manage considerable conversations out of the corner of his mouth, which Fafhrd would answer, if at all, in the same way—though in his case presumably from abstraction rather than policy.

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"Look, Fafhrd," the Mouser said on the third of such occasions, meanwhile pretending to study a skinny-limbed pot-bellied beggar girl, as if trying to decide whether a diet of lean meat and certain callisthenics would bring out in her a rare gaminesque beauty—"Look, Fafhrd, right here you have what you want, whatever that is—*I* think it's a chance to patch up poetry and squeak it at fools—but whatever it is, you *must* have it here near the Marsh Gate, for the only thing in the world that is not near the Marsh Gate is money, and you tell me you don't want that—the more fool you!—but let me tell you something: if you let Bwadres get any nearer the Citadel, yes even a pebble's toss, you will get money whether you want it or not, and with that money you and Bwadres will buy something, also willy-nilly and no matter how tightly you close your purse and shut your ears to the cries of the hawkers. That thing which you and Bwadres will buy is trouble."

Fafhrd answered only with a faint grunt that was the equivalent of a shoulder shrug. He was looking steadily down past his bushy beard with almost cross-eyed concentration at something his long fingers were manipulating powerfully yet delicately, but that the large backs of his hands concealed from the Mouser's view.

"How is the old fool, by the by, since he's eating regularly?" the Mouser continued, leaning a hair closer in an effort to see what Fafhrd was handling. "Still stubborn as ever, eh? Still set on taking Issek to the Citadel? Still as unreasonable about . . . er . . . business matters?"

"Bwadres is a good man," Fafhrd said quietly.

"More and more that appears to be the heart of the trouble," the Mouser answered with a certain sardonic exasperation. "But look, Fafhrd, it's not necessary to change Bwadres' mind—I'm beginning to doubt whether even Sheelba and Ning, working together, could achieve that cosmic revolution. You can do by yourself all that needs to be done. Just give your poetry a little downbeat, add a little defeatism to Issek's Creed—even you must be tired by now of all this ridiculous mating of northern stoicism to southern masochism, and wanting a change. One theme's good as another to a true artist. Or, simpler still, merely refrain from

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moving Issek's altar up the street on your big night . . . or even move it down a little! —Bwadres gets so excited when you have big crowds that the old fool doesn't know which direction you're going, anyhow. You could progress like the well-frog. Or, wisest of all, merely prepare yourself to split the take before you hand over the collection to Bwadres. I could teach you the necessary legerdemain in the space of one dawn, though you really don't need it—with those huge hands you can palm anything."

"No," said Fafhrd.

"Suit yourself," the Mouser said very very lightly, though not quite unfeelingly. "Buy trouble if you will, death if you must. Fafhrd, what *is* that thing you're fiddling with? No, don't hand it to me, you idiot! Just let me glimpse it. By the Black Bones in the First Black Toga!—what *is* that?"

Without looking up or otherwise moving, Fafhrd had cupped his hands sideways, much as if he were displaying in the Mouser's direction a captive butterfly or beetle—and indeed it did seem at first glimpse as if it were a rare large beetle he was cautiously baring to view, one with a carapace of softly burnished gold.

"It is an offering to Issek," Fafhrd droned. "An offering made last night by a devout lady who is wed in spirit to the god."

"Yes, and to half the young aristos of Lankhmar too and not at all in spirit," the Mouser hissed. "I know one of Lessnya's double-spiral bracelets when I see it. Reputedly given her by the Twin Dukes of Ilthmar, by the by. What did you have to do to her to get it?—stop, don't answer. I know . . . recite poetry! Fafhrd, things are far worse than I dreamed. If Pulg knew you were already getting gold . . ." He let his whisper trail off. "But what have you *done* with it?"

"Fashioned it into a representation of the Holy Jug," Fafhrd answered, bowing his head a shade farther and opening his hands a bit wider and tipping them a trifle.

"So I see," the Mouser hissed. The soft gold had been twisted into a remarkably smooth strange knot. "And not a bad job either, though a most barbarous one. Not a bad job at all. Fafhrd, how you keep such a delicate feeling for curves when for six months you've slept without them against you is quite be-

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yond me. Doubtless such things go by opposites. Don't speak for a moment now, I'm getting an idea. And by the Black Scapula!—a good one! Fafhrd, you must give me that trinket so that I may give it to Pulg. No—please hear me out and then think this through!—not for the gold in it, not as a bribe or as part of a first split—I'm not asking that of you or Bwadres—but simply as a keepsake, a presentation piece. Fafhrd, I've been getting to know Pulg lately and I find he has a strange sentimental streak in him—he likes to get little gifts, little trophies, from his . . . er . . . customers, we sometimes call them. These curios must always be items relating to the god in question—chalices, censors, bones in silver filigree, jeweled amulets, that sort of thing. He likes to sit looking at his shelves of them and dream. Sometimes I think the man is getting religion without realizing it. If I should bring him this bauble he would—I know!—develop an affection for Issek. He would tell me to go easy on Bwadres. It would probably even be possible to put off the question of tribute money for . . . well, for three more squares at least."

"No," said Fafhrd.

"So be it, my friend. Come with me, my dear, I am going to buy you a steak." This second remark was in the Mouser's regular speaking voice and directed, of course, at the beggar girl, who reacted with a look of already practiced and rather langorous affright. "Not a fish steak either, puss. Did you know there were other kinds? Toss this coin to your mother, dear, and come. The stall is four squares up. No, we won't take a litter—you need the exercise. *Farewell—Death-seeker!*"

Despite the wash-my-hands-of-you tone of this last whisper, the Gray Mouser did what he could to put off the evil night of reckoning, devising more pressing tasks for Pulg's bullies and alleging that this or that omen was against the immediate settling of the Bwadres account—for Pulg, alongside his pink streak of sentimentality, had recently taken to sporting a gray one of superstition.

There would have been no insurmountable problem at all, of course, if Bwadres had only had that touch of realism about money matters that, when a true crisis arises, is almost invariably shown by even the fattest, greediest

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priest or the skinniest, most unworldly holy man. But Bwadres was stubborn—it was probably, as we have hinted, the sole remaining symptom, though a most inconvenient one, of his only seemingly cast-off senility. Not one rusty iron *tik* (the smallest coin of Lankhmar) would he pay to extortioners —such was Bwadres' boast. To make matters worse, if that were possible, he would not even *spend* money renting gaudy furniture or temple space for Issek, as was practically mandatory for gods progressing up the central stretch of the Street. Instead he averred that every tik collected, every bronze agol, every silver smerduk, every gold rilk, yes every diamond-in-amber glulditch! — would be saved to *buy* for Issek the finest temple at the Citadel end, in fact the temple of Aarth the Invisible All-Listener, accounted one of the most ancient and powerful of all the gods in Lankhmar.

Naturally this insane challenge, thrown out for all to hear, had the effect of still further increasing Issek's popularity and swelled his congregations with all sorts of folk who came, at first at least, purely as curiosity seekers. The odds on how far Issek would get up the Street how soon (for they regularly bet on such things in Lankhmar) began to switch wildly up and down as the affair got quite beyond the shrewd but essentially limited imaginations of bookmakers. Bwadres took to sleeping curled in the gutter around Issek's coffer (first an old garlic bag, later a small stout cask with a slit in the top for coins) and with Fafhrd curled around him. Only one of them slept at a time, the other rested but kept watch.

At one point the Mouser almost decided to slit Bwadres' throat as the only possible way off his dilemma. But he knew that such an act would be the one unforgivable crime against his new profession—it would be *bad for business* —and certain to ruin him forever with Pulg and all other extortioners if ever traced to him even in faintest suspicion. Bwadres must be roughed up if necessary, yes even tortured, but at the same time he must be treated in all ways as a goose who laid golden eggs. Moreover, the Mouser had a presentiment that putting Bwadres out of the way would not stop Issek. Not while Issek had Fafhrd.

What finally brought the af-

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fair to a head, or rather to its first head, and forced the Mouser's hand was the inescapable realization that if he held off any longer from putting the bite on Bwadres for Pulg, then rival extortioners —one Bashabek in particular —would do it on their own account. As the Number One Racketeer of Religions in Lankhmar, Pulg certainly had first grab, but if he delayed for an unreasonable length of time in making it (no matter on what grounds of omens or arguments about fattening the sacrifice) then Bwadres was anybody's victim—Bashabek's in particular, as Pulg's chief rival.

So it came about, as it so often does, that the Mouser's efforts to avert the evil nightfall only made it darker and stormier when it finally came down.

When at last that penultimate evening did arrive, signalized by a final warning sent Pulg by Bashabek, the Mouser, who had been hoping all along for some wonderful last-minute inspiration that never came, took what may seem to some a coward's way out. Making use of the beggar girl, whom he had named Lilyblack, and certain other of his creatures, he circulated a rumor that the Treasurer of the Temple of Aarth was preparing to decamp in a rented black sloop across the Inner Sea, taking with him all funds and temple-valuables, including a set of black-pearl-crusted altar furnishings, gift of the wife of the High Overlord, on which the split had not yet been made with Pulg. He timed the rumor so that it would return to him, by unimpeachable channels, just after he had set out for Issek's spot with four well-armed bullies.

It may be noted, in passing, that Aarth's Treasurer actually was in monetary hot waters and really had rented a black sloop. Which proved not only that the Mouser used good sound fabric for his fabrications, but also that Bwadres had by landlords' and bankers' standards made a very sound choice in selecting Issek's temple-to-be—whether by chance or by some strange shrewdness co-dwelling with his senile stubbornness.

The Mouser could not divert his whole expeditionary force, for Bwadres must be saved from Bashabek. However, he was able to split it with the almost certain knowledge that Pulg would consider his action the best

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strategy available at the moment. Three of the bullies he sent on with firm instructions to bring Bwadres to account, while he himself raced off with minimum guard to intercept the supposedly fleeing and loot-encumbered treasurer.

Of course the Mouser *could* have made himself part of the Bwadres-party, but that would have meant he would have had personally to best Fafhrd or be bested by him, and while the Mouser wanted to do everything possible for his friend he wanted to do just a little bit more than that (he thought) for his own security.

Some, as we have suggested, may think that in taking this way out the Gray Mouser was throwing his friend to the wolves. However, it must always be remembered that the Mouser knew Fafhrd.

The three bullies, who did *not* know Fafhrd (the Mouser had selected them for that reason), were pleased with the turn of events. An independent commission always meant the chance of some brilliant achievement and so perhaps of promotion. They waited for the first break between services, when there was inevitably considerable passing about and jostling. Then one, who had a small axe in his belt, went straight for Bwadres and his cask, which the holy man also used as altar, draping it for the purpose with the sacred garlic bag. Another drew sword and menaced Fafhrd, keeping sound distance from and careful watch on the giant. The third, adopting the jesting, rough-and-ready manner of the master of the show in a bawdy house, spoke ringing warnings to the crowd and kept a reasonably watchful eye on *them*. The folk of Lankhmar are so bound by tradition that it was unthinkable that they would interfere with any activities as legitimate as those of an extortioner—the Number One Extortioner, too—even in defense of a most favored priest, but there are occasional foreigners and madmen to be dealt with (though in Lankhmar even the madmen generally respect the traditions).

No one in the congregation saw the crucial thing that happened next, for their eyes were all on the first bully, who was lightly choking Bwadres with one hand while pointing his axe at the cask with the other. There was a cry of surprise and a clatter. The second bully, lunged forward

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toward Fafhrd, had dropped his sword and was shaking his hand as if it pained him. Without haste Fafhrd picked him up by the slack of his garments between his shoulder-blades, reached the first bully in two giant strides, slapped the axe from his hand, and picked him up likewise.

It was an impressive sight: the giant, gaunt-cheeked, bearded acolyte wearing his long robe of undyed camel's hair (recent gift of a votary) and standing with knees bent and feet wide-planted as he held aloft to either side a squirming bully.

But although indeed a most impressive tableau, it presented a made-to-order opening for the third bully, who instantly unsheathed his scimitar and, with an acrobat's smile and wave to the crowd, lunged forward long and low and swept his cruel sword upward toward the apex of the obtuse angle formed by the juncture of Fafhrd's legs.

The crowd shuddered and squealed with the thought of the poignancy of the blow.

There was a muffled *thud*. The third bully dropped *his* sword. Without changing his stance Fafhrd swept together the two bullies he was holding so that their heads met with a loud *thunk*. With an equally measured movement he swept them apart again and sent them sprawling to either side, unconscious, among the onlookers. Then stepping forward, still without seeming haste, he picked up the third bully by neck and crotch and pitched him a considerably greater distance into the crowd, where he bowled over two of Bashabek's henchmen who had been watching the proceedings with great interest.

There was absolute silence for three heartbeats, then the crowd applauded rapturously. While the tradition-bound Lankhmarians thought it highly proper for extortioners to extort, they also considered it completely in character for a strange acolyte to work miracles, and they never omitted to clap a good performance.

Bwadres, fingering his throat and still gasping a little, smiled with simple pleasure and when Fafhrd finally acknowledged the applause by dropping down cross-legged to the cobbles and bowing his head, the old priest launched instantly into a sermon in which he further electrified the crowd by several times hinting that, in his

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celestial realms *Issek was preparing to visit Lankhmar in person.* His acolyte's routing of the three evil men Bwadres attributed to the inspiration of Issek's might—to be interpreted as a sort of foretaste of the god's approaching reincarnation.

The most significant consequence of this victory of the doves over the hawks was a little midnight conference in the back room of the Inn of the Silver Eel, where Pulg first warmly praised and then coolly castigated the Gray Mouser.

He praised the Mouser for intercepting the Treasurer of Aarth, who it turned out *had* just been embarking on the black sloop, not to flee Lankhmar, though, but only to spend a water-guarded week end with several riotous companions and one Ilala, High Priestess of the goddess of the same name. However, he *had* actually taken along several of the black-pearl-crusted altar furnishings, apparently as a gift for the High Priestess, and the Mouser very properly confiscated them before wishing the holy band the most exquisite of pleasures on their holiday. Pulg judged that the Mouser's loot amounted to just about twice the usual cut, which seemed a reasonable figure to cover the Treasurer's irregularity.

He rebuked the Mouser for failing to warn the three bullies about Fafhrd and omitting to instruct them in detail on how to deal with the giant.

"They're your boys, son, and I judge you by their performance," Pulg told the Mouser in fatherly matter-of-fact tones. "To me, if they stumble, you flop. You know this Northerner well, son, you should have had them trained to meet his sleights. You solved your main problem well, but you slipped on an important detail. I expect good strategy from my lieutenants, but I demand flawless tactics."

The Mouser bowed his head.

"You and this Northerner were comrades once," Pulg continued. He leaned forward across the dinted table and drew down his lower lip. "You're not still soft on him, are you, son?"

The Mouser arched his eyebrows, flared his nostrils and slowly swung his face from side to side.

Pulg thoughtfully scratched his nose. "So we come to tomorrow night," he said. "Must make an example of Bwadres—an example that will stick like Mingol glue. I'd

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suggest having Grilli hamstring the Northerner at the first onset. Can't kill him—he's the one that brings in the money. But with ankle tendons cut he could still stump around on his hands and knees and be in some ways an even better drawing card. How's that sound to you?"

The Mouser slitted his eyes in thought for three breaths. Then, "Bad," he said boldly. "It gripes me to admit it, but this Northerner sometimes conjures up battle-sleights that even I can't be sure of countering — crazy berserk tricks born of sudden whim that no civilized man can anticipate. Chances are Grilli could nick him, but what if he didn't? Here's my reed—it lets you rightly think that I may still be soft on the man, but I give it because it's my best reed: let me get him drunk at nightfall. Dead drunk. Then he's out of the way for certain."

Pulg frowned. "Sure you can deliver on that, son? They say he's forsworn booze. And he sticks to Bwadres like a giant squid."

"I can detach him," the Mouser said. "And this way we don't risk spoiling him for Bwadres' show. Battle's always uncertain. You may plan to hock a man and then have to cut his throat."

Pulg shook his head. "We also leave him fit to tangle with our collectors the next time they come for the cash. Can't get him drunk every time we pick up the split. Too complicated. And looks very weak."

"No need to," the Mouser said confidently. "Once Bwadres starts paying, the Northerner will go along."

Pulg continued to shake his head. "You're guessing, son," he said. "Oh, to the best of your ability, but still guessing. I want this deal bagged up strongly. An example that will stick, I said. Remember, son, the man we're really putting on this show for tomorrow night is Bashabek. He'll be there, you can bet on it, though standing in the last row, I imagine—did you hear how your Northerner dumped two of his boys? I liked that." He grinned widely, then instantly grew serious again. "So we'll do it my way, eh? Grilli's very sure."

The Mouser shrugged once, deadpan. "If you say so. Of course, some Northerners suicide when crippled. I don't think *he* would, but he might. Still, even allowing for that, I'd say your plan has four

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chances in five of working out perfectly. Four in five."

Pulg frowned furiously, his rather piggy red-rimmed eyes fixed on the Mouser. Finally he said, "*Sure* you can get him drunk, son? Five in five?"

"I can do it," the Mouser said. He had thought of a half dozen additional arguments in favor of his plan, but he did not utter them. He did not even add, "Six in six," as he was tempted to. He was learning.

Pulg suddenly leaned back in his chair and laughed, signing that the business part of their conference was over. He tweaked the naked girl standing beside him. "Wine!" he ordered. "No, not that sugary slop I keep for customers—didn't Zizzi instruct you?—but the real stuff from behind the green idol. Come, son, pledge me a cup, and then tell me a little about this Issek. I'm interested in him. I'm interested in 'em all." He waved loosely at the darkly gleaming shelves of religious curios in the handsomely carved traveling case rising beyond the end of the table. He frowned a very different frown from his business one. "There are more things in this world than we understand," he said sententiously. "Did you know that, son?" The Great Man shook his head, again very differently. He was swiftly sinking into his most deeply metaphysical mood. "Makes me wonder, sometimes. You and I, son, know that these—" (He waved again at the case) "—are toys. But the feelings that men have toward them . . . they're real, eh?—and they can be strange. Easy to understand part of those feelings — brats shivering at bogies, fools gawking at a show and hoping for blood or a bit of undressing—but there's another part that's strange. The priests bray nonsense, the people groan and pray, and then *something* comes into existence. I don't know what that something is —I wish I did, I think—but it's strange." He shook his head. "Make any man wonder. So drink your wine, son—watch his cup, girl, and don't let it empty—and talk to me about Issek. I'm interested in 'em all, but right now I'd like to hear about him."

He did not in any way hint that for the past two months he had been watching the services of Issek for at least five nights a week from behind a veiled window in various lightless rooms along the

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Street of the Gods. It was certain that was something that not even the Mouser knew about Pulg.

So as a pinkly opalescent, rose-ribboned dawn surged up the sky from the black and stinking Marsh, the Mouser sought out Fafhrd. Bwadres was still snoring in the gutter, embracing Issek's cask, but the big barbarian was awake and sitting on the curb, hand grasping his chin under his beard. Already a few children had gathered at a respectful distance, though no one else was abroad.

"That the one they can't stab or cut?" the Mouser heard one of the children whisper.

"That's him," another answered.

"I'd like to sneak up behind him and stick him with this pin."

"I'll bet you would!"

"I guess he's got iron skin," said a tiny girl with large eyes.

The Mouser smothered a guffaw, patted that last child on the head, and then advanced straight to Fafhrd and, with a grimace at the stained refuse between the cobbles, squatted fastidiously on his hams. He still could do it easily though his new belly made a considerable pillow in his lap.

He said without preamble, speaking too low for the children to hear, "Some say the strength of Issek lies in love, some say in honesty, some say in courage, some say in stinking hypocrisy. I believe I have guessed the one true answer. If I am right, you will drink wine with me. If I am wrong, I will strip to my loincloth, declare Issek my god and master, and serve as acolyte's acolyte. Is it a wager?"

Fafhrd studied him. "It is done," he said.

The Mouser advanced his right hand and lightly rapped Fafhrd's body twice through the soiled camel's hair—once on the chest, once between the legs.

Each time there was a faint *thud* with just the hint of a *clank*.

"The cuirass of Mingsward and the groin-piece of Gortch," the Mouser pronounced. "Each heavily padded to keep them from ringing. Therein lie Issek's strength and invulnerability. They wouldn't have fit you six months ago."

Fafhrd sat as one bemused. Then his face broke into a large grin. "You win," he said. "When do I pay?"

"This very afternoon," the

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Mouser whispered, "when Bwadres eats and takes his forty winks." He rose with a light grunt and made off, stepping daintily from cobble to cobble.

Soon the Street of the Gods grew moderately busy and for a while Fafhrd was surrounded by a scattering of the curious, but it was a very hot day for Lankhmar. By mid-afternoon the Street was deserted, even the children had sought shade. Bwadres droned through the Acloyte's Litany twice with Fafhrd, then called for food by touching his hand to his mouth—it was his ascetic custom always to eat at this uncomfortable time rather than in the cool of the evening.

Fafhrd went off and shortly returned with a large bowl of fish stew. Bwadres blinked at the size of it, but tucked it away, belched, and curled around the cask after an admonition to Fafhrd. He was snoring almost immediately.

A hiss sounded from the low wide archway behind them. Fafhrd stood up and quietly moved into the shadows of the portico. The Mouser gripped his arm and guided him toward one of several curtained doorways.

"Your sweat's a flood, my friend," he said softly. "Tell me, do you really wear the armor from prudence, or is it a kind of metal hair-shirt?"

Fafhrd did not answer. He blinked at the curtain the Mouser drew aside. "I don't like this," he said. "It's a house of assignation. I may be seen and then what will dirty-minded people think?"

"Hung for the kid, hung for the goat," the Mouser said lightly. "Besides, you haven't been seen—yet. In with you!"

Fafhrd complied. The heavy curtains swung to behind them, leaving the room in which they stood lit only by high louvers. As Fafhrd squinted into the semi-darkness, the Mouser said, "I've paid the evening's rent on this place. It's private, it's near. None will know. What more could you ask?"

"I guess you're right," Fafhrd said uneasily. "But you've spent too much rent money. Understand, my little man, I can have only one drink with you. You tricked me into that—after a fashion you did—but I pay. But only one cup of wine, little man. We're friends, but we have our separate paths to tread. So only one cup. Or at most two."

"Naturally," purred the Mouser.

The objects in the room

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grew in the swimming gray blank of Fafhrd's vision. There was an inner door (also curtained), a narrow bed, a basin, a low table and stool, and on the floor beside the stool several portly short-necked large-eared shapes. Fafhrd counted them and once again his face broke into a large grin.

"Hung for a kid, you said," he rumbled softly in his old bass voice, continuing to eye the stone bottles of vintage. "I see four kids, Mouser."

The Mouser echoed himself. "Naturally."

By the time the candle the Mouser had fetched was guttering in a little pool Fafhrd was draining the third "kid." He held it upended above his head and caught the last drop, then batted it lightly away like a large feather-stuffed ball. As its shards exploded from the floor, he bent over from where he was sitting on the bed, bent so low that his beard brushed the floor, and clasped the last "kid" with both hands and lifted it with exaggerated care onto the table. Then taking up a very short-bladed knife and keeping his eyes so close to his work that they were inevitably crossed, he picked every last bit of resin out of the neck, flake by tiny flake.

Fafhrd no longer looked at all like an acolyte, even a misbehaving one. After finishing the first "kid" he had stripped for action. His camel's hair robe was flung into one corner of the room, the pieces of padded armor into another. Wearing only a once-white loincloth he looked like some lean doomful berserk, or a barbaric king in a bath-house.

For some time no light had been coming through the louvers. Now there was a little—the red glow of torches. The noises of night had started and were on the increase —thin laughter, hawkers' cries, various summonses to prayer . . . and Bwadres calling "Fafhrd!" again and again in his raspy long-carrying voice. But that last had stopped some time ago.

Fafhrd took so long with the resin, handling it like gold leaf, that the Mouser had to fight down several groans of impatience. But he was smiling his soft smile of victory. He did move once—to light a fresh taper from the expiring one. Fafhrd did not seem to notice the change in illumination. By now, it occurred to the Mouser, his friend was doubtless seeing everything by that brilliant light of spirits of wine which illum-

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ines the way of all brave drunkards.

Without any warning the Northerner lifted the short knife high and stabbed it into the center of the cork.

"Die, false Mingol!" he cried, withdrawing the knife with a twist, the cork on its point. "I drink your blood!" And he lifted the stone bottle to his lips.

After he had gulped about a third of its contents, by the Mouser's calculation, he set it down rather suddenly on the table. His eyeballs rolled upward, all the muscles of his body quivered with the passing of a beatific spasm, and he sank back majestically, like a tree that falls with care. The frail bed creaked ominously but did not collapse under its burden.

Yet this was not quite the end. An anxious crease appeared between Fafhrd's shaggy eyebrows, his head tilted up and his bloodshot eyes peered out menacingly from their eagle's nest of hair, searching the room.

Their gaze finally settled on the last stone bottle. A long rigidly-muscled arm shot out, a great hand shut on the top of the bottle and placed it under the edge of the bed and did not leave it. Then Fafhrd's eyes closed, his head dropped back with finality and, smiling, he began to snore.

The Mouser stood up and came over. He rolled back one of Fafhrd's eyelids, gave a satisfied nod, then gave another after feeling Fafhrd's pulse, which was surging with as slow and strong a rhythm as the breakers of the Outer Sea. Meanwhile the Mouser's other hand, operating with an habitual deftness and artistry unnecessary under the circumstances, abstracted from a fold in Fafhrd's loincloth a gleaming gold object he had earlier glimpsed there. He tucked it away in a secret pocket in the skirt of his gray tunic.

Someone coughed behind him.

It was such a deliberate-sounding cough that the Mouser did not leap or start, but only turned around without changing the planting of his feet in a movement slow and sinuous as that of a ceremonial dancer in the Temple of the Snake.

Pulg was standing in the inner doorway, wearing the black-and-silver striped robe and cowl of a masker and holding a black, jewel-spangled vizard a little aside from his face. He was looking at the Mouser enigmatically.

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"I didn't think you could do it, son, but you did," he said softly. "You patch your credit with me at a wise time. Ho, Wiggin, Quatch! Ho. Grilli!"

The three henchmen glided into the room behind Pulg, all garbed in garments as somberly gay as their master's. The first two were stocky men, but the third was slim as a weasel and shorter than the Mouser, at whom he glared with guarded and rivalrous venom. The first two were armed with small crossbows and shortswords, but the third had no weapon in view.

"You have the cords, Quatch?" Pulg continued. He pointed at Fafhrd. "Then bind me this man to the bed. See that you secure well his brawny arms."

"He's safer unbound," the Mouser started to say, but Pulg cut in on him with, "Easy, son. You're still running this job, but I'm going to be looking over your shoulder, yes and I'm going to be revising your plan as you go along, changing any detail I choose. Good training for you. Any competent lieutenant should be able to operate under the eyes of his general, yes even when other subordinates are listening in on the reprimands. We'll call it a test."

The Mouser was alarmed and puzzled. There was something about Pulg's behavior that he did not at all understand. Something discordant, as if a secret struggle were going on inside the master extortioner. He was not obviously drunk, yet his piggy eyes had a strange gleam. He almost seemed fey.

"How have I forfeited your trust?" the Mouser asked sharply.

Pulg grinned skewily. "Son, I'm ashamed of you," he said. "High Priestess Ilala told me the *full* story of the black sloop—how you sublet it from the treasurer in return for allowing him to keep the pearl tiara and stomacher. How you had Ourph the deafmute Mingol sail it to another dock. Ilala got mad at the treasurer because he went cold on her or scared and wouldn't give her the black gewgaws. That's why she came to me. To cap it, your Lilyblack spilled the same story to Grilli here, whom she favors. Well, son?"

The Mouser folded his arms and threw back his head. "You said yourself the split was sufficient," he told Pulg. "We can always use another sloop."

Pulg laughed low and rather long. "Don't get me wrong,

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son," he said at last. "I *like* my lieutenants to be the sort of men who'd want a bolt-hole handy — I'd suspect their brains if they didn't. I *want* them to be the sort of men who worry a lot about their precious skins, but only after worrying about *my* hide first! Don't fret, son. We'll get along—I think. Quatch! Is he bound yet?"

The two burlier henchmen, who had hooked their crossbows to their belts, were well along with their job. Tight loops of rope at chest, waist and knees bound Fafhrd to the bed, while his wrists had been drawn up level with the top of his head and tightly laced to the sides of the bed. Fafhrd still snored peacefully on his back. He had stirred a little and groaned when his hand had been drawn away from the bottle under the bed, but that was all. Wiggin was preparing to bind the Northerner's ankles, but Pulg signed it was enough.

"Grilli!" Pulg called. "Your razor!"

The weasel-like henchman seemed merely to wave his hand past his chest and—lo! —there was a gleaming square-headed blade in it. He smiled as he moved toward Fafhrd's naked ankles. He caressed the thick tendons under them and looked pleadingly at Pulg.

Pulg was watching the Mouser narrowly.

The Mouser felt an unbearable tension stiffening him. He must do something! He raised the back of his hand to his mouth and yawned.

Pulg pointed at Fafhrd's other end. "Grilli," he repeated, "shave me this man! Debeard and demane him! Shave him like an egg!" Then he leaned toward the Mouser and said in a sort of slack-mouthed confidential way, "I've heard of these barbs that it draws their strength. Think you so? No matter, we'll see."

Slashing off a lusty man's head-and-face hair and then shaving him close takes considerable time, even when the barber is as shudderingly swift as Grilli and as heedless of the dim and flickering light. Time enough for the Mouser to assess the situation seventeen different ways and still not find its ultimate key. One thing shone through from every angle: the irrationality of Pulg's behavior. Spilling secrets . . . accusing a lieutenant in front of henchmen . . . proposing an idiot "test" . . . wearing grotesque holiday clothes . . . binding a

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man dead drunk . . . and now this superstitious nonsense of shaving Fafhrd—why, it was as if Pulg were fey indeed and performing some eerie ritual under the demented guise of shrewd tactics.

And there was one thing the Mouser was certain of: that when Pulg got through being fey or drugged or whatever it was, he would never again trust any of the men who had been through the experience with him, including—most particularly!—the Mouser. It was a sad conclusion—to admit that his hard-bought security was now worthless—yet it was a realistic one and the Mouser perforce came to it. So even while he continued to puzzle, the small man in gray congratulated himself on having bargained himself so disastrously into possession of the black sloop. A bolt-hole might soon be handy indeed, and he doubted whether Pulg had discovered where Ourph had concealed the craft. Meanwhile he must expect treachery from Pulg at any step and death from Pulg's henchmen at their master's unpredictable whim. So the Mouser decided that the less *they* (Grilli in particular) were in a position to do the Mouser or anyone else damage, the better.

Pulg was laughing again. "Why, he looks like a new-hatched babe!" the master extortioner exclaimed. "Good work, Grilli!"

Fafhrd did indeed look startlingly youthful without any hair above that on his chest, and in a way far more like what most people think an acolyte should look. He might even have appeared romantically handsome except that Grilli, in perhaps an excess of zeal, had also shorn naked his eyebrows—which had the effect of making Fafhrd's head, very pale under the vanished hair, seem like a marble bust set atop a living body.

Pulg continued to chuckle. "And no spot of blood—no, not one! That is the best of omens! Grilli, I love you!"

That was true enough too—in spite of his demonic speed, Grilli had not once nicked Fafhrd's face or head. Doubtless a man thwarted of the opportunity to hamstring another would scorn any lesser cutting—indeed, consider it a blot on his own character. Or so the Mouser guessed.

Gazing at his shorn friend, the Mouser felt almost inclined to laugh himself. Yet this impulse—and along with it

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his lively fear for his own and Fafhrd's safety—was momentarily swallowed up in the feeling that something about this whole business was very *wrong*—wrong not only by any ordinary standards, but also in a deeply occult sense. This stripping of Fafhrd, this shaving of him, this binding of him to the ricketty narrow bed . . . wrong, wrong wrong! Once again it occurred to him, more strongly this time, that Pulg was unknowingly performing an eldritch ritual.

"Hist!" Pulg cried, raising a finger. The Mouser obediently listened along with the three henchmen and their master. The ordinary noises outside had diminished, for a moment almost ceased. Then through the curtained doorway and the red-lit louvers came the raspy high voice of Bwadres beginning the Long Litany and the mumbling sigh of the crowd's response.

Pulg clapped the Mouser hard on the shoulder. "He is about it! 'Tiz time!" he cried. "Command us! We will see, son, how well you have planned. Remember, I will be watching over your shoulder and that it is my desire that you strike at the end of Bwadres' sermon when the collection is taken." He frowned at Grilli, Wiggin and Quatch. "Obey this my lieutenant!" he warned sternly. "Jump at his least command!—save when I countermand. Come on, son, hurry it up, start giving orders!"

The Mouser would have liked to punch Pulg in the middle of the jeweled vizard which the extortioner was just now again lifting to his face—punch his fat nose and fly this madhouse of commanded commandings. But there was Fafhrd to be considered — stripped, shaved, bound, dead drunk, immeasurably helpless. The Mouser contented himself with starting through the outer door and motioning the henchmen and Pulg too to follow him. Hardly to his surprise—for it was difficult to decide *what* behavior would have been surprising under the circumstances—they obeyed him.

He signed Grilli to hold the curtain aside for the others. Glancing back over the smaller man's shoulder he saw Quatch, last to leave, dip to blow out the taper and under cover of that movement snag the two-thirds full bottle of wine from under the edge of the bed and lug it along with him. And for some reason that innocently thievish act struck the Mouser as being

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the most occultly wrong thing of all the supernally off-key events that had been occurring recently. He wished there were some god in whom he had real trust so that he could pray to him for enlightenment and guidance in the ocean of inexplicably strange intuitions engulfing him. But unfortunately for the Mouser there was no such divinity. So there was nothing for it but to plunge all by himself into that strange ocean and take his chances—do without calculation whatever the inspiration of the moment moved him to do.

So while Bwadres keened and rasped through the Long Litany against the sighing responses of the crowd (and an uncommonly large number of cat-calls and boos), the Mouser was very busy indeed, helping prepare the setting and place the characters for a drama of which he did not know more than scraps of the plot. The many shadows were his friends in this—he could slip almost invisibly from one shielding darkness to another —and he had the trays of half the hawkers in Lankhmar as a source of stage properties.

Among other things, he insisted on personally inspecting the weapons of Quatch and Wiggin—the shortswords and their sheaths, the small crossbows and the quivers of tiny quarrels that were their ammunition — most wicked-looking short arrows. By the time the Long Litany had reached its wailing conclusion, the stage was set, though exactly when and where and how the curtain would rise—and who would be the audience and who the players—remained uncertain.

At all events it was an impressive scene: the long Street of the Gods stretching off toward a colorful torchlit dolls' world of distance in either direction, low clouds racing overhead, faint ribbons of mist gliding in from the Great Salt Marsh, the rumble of far distant thunder, bleat and growl of priests of gods other than Issek, squealing laughter of women and children, leather-lunged calling of hawkers and news-slaves, odor of incense curling from temples mingling with the oily aroma of fried foods on hawkers' trays, the reek of smoking torches, and the musk and flower smells of gaudy ladies.

Issek's audience, augmented by the many drawn by the tale of last night's doings of the demon acolyte and the wild predictions of Bwadres,

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blocked the Street from curb to curb, leaving only difficult gangway through the roofed porticos to either side. All levels of Lankhmarian society were represented—rags and ermine, bare feet and jeweled sandals, mercenaries' steel and philosophers' wands, faces painted with rare cosmetics and faces powdered only with dust, eyes of hunger, eyes of satiety, eyes of mad belief and eyes of a skepticism that hid fear.

Bwadres, panting a little after the Long Litany, stood on the curb across the Street from the low archway of the house where the drunken Fafhrd slept bound. His shaking hand rested on the cask that, draped now with the garlic bag, was both Issek's coffer and altar. Crowded so close as to leave him almost no striding space were the inner circles of the congregation —devotees sitting cross-legged, crouched on knees, or squatting on hams.

The Mouser had stationed Wiggin and Quatch by an overset fishmonger's cart in the center of the Street. They passed back and forth the stone bottle Quatch had snared, doubtless in part to make their odorous post more bearable, though every time the Mouser noted their bibbing he had a return of the feeling of occult wrongness.

Pulg had picked for his post a side of the low archway in front of Fafhrd's house, to call it that. He kept Grilli beside him, while the Mouser crouched nearby after his preparations were complete. Pulg's jeweled mask was hardly exceptional in the setting; several women were vizarded and a few of the other men—colorful blank spots in the sea of faces.

It was certainly not a calm sea. Not a few of the audience seemed greatly annoyed at the absence of the giant acolyte (and had been responsible for the boos and cat-calls during the Litany). While even the regulars missed the acolyte's lute and his sweet tenor tale-telling and were exchanging anxious questions and speculations. All it took was someone to shout, "Where's the acolyte?" and in a few moments half the audience was chanting, "We want the acolyte! We want the acolyte!"

Bwadres silenced them by looking earnestly up the Street with shaded eyes, pretending he saw one coming, and then suddenly pointing dramatically in that direction, as if to signal the approach

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of the man for whom they were calling. While the crowd craned their necks and shoved about, trying to see what Bwadres was pretending to—and incidentally left off chanting—the ancient priest launched into his sermon.

"I will tell you what has happened to my acolyte!" he cried. "Lankhmar has swallowed him, Lankhmar has gobbled him up—Lankhmar the evil city, the city of drunkenness and lechery and all corruption — Lankhmar, the city of the stinking black bones!"

This last blasphemous reference to the gods *of* Lankhmar (whom it can be death to mention, though the gods *in* Lankhmar may be insulted without limit) further shocked the crowd into silence.

Bwadres raised his hands and face to the low racing clouds.

"Oh, Issek, compassionate mighty Issek, pity thy humble servitor who now stands friendless and alone. I had one acolyte, strong in thy defense, but they took him from me. You told him, Issek, much of your life and your secrets, he had ears to hear it and lips to sing it, but now the black devils have got him! Oh, Issek, have pity!"

Bwadres spread his hands toward the mob and looked them around.

"Issek was a young god when he walked the earth, a young god speaking only of love, yet they bound him to the rack of torture. He brought Waters of Peace for all in his Holy Jug, but they broke it." And here Bwadres described at great length and with far more vividness than his usual wont (perhaps he felt he had to make up for the absence of his skald-turned-acolyte) the life and especially the torments and death of Issek of the Jug, until there was hardly one among the listeners who did not have vividly in mind the vision of Issek on his rack (succession of racks, rather) and who did not feel at least sympathetic twinges in his joints at the thought of the god's suffering.

Women and strong men wept unashamedly, beggars and scullions howled, philosophers covered their ears.

Bwadres wailed on toward a shuddering climax. "As you yielded up your precious ghost on the eighth rack, oh, Issek, as your broken hands fashioned even your torturer's collar into a Jug of surpassing beauty, you thought only of us, oh, Holy Youth. You thought only of making

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beautiful the lives of the most tormented and deformed of us, thy miserable slaves."

At those words Pulg took several staggering steps forward from the side of the archway, dragging Grilli with him, and dropped to his knees on the filthy cobbles. His black-and-silver striped cowl fell back on his shoulders and his jeweled black vizard slipped from his face, which was thus revealed as unashamedly coursing with tears.

"I renounce all other gods," the boss extortioner gasped between sobs. "Hereafter I serve only gentle Issek of the Jug."

The weasley Grilli, crouching contortedly in his efforts to avoid being smirched by the nasty pavement, gazed at his master as at one demented, yet could not or still dared not break Pulg's hold on his wrist.

Pulg's action attracted no particular attention—conversions were a smerduk a score at the moment — but the Mouser took note of it, especially since Pulg's advance had brought him so close that the Mouser could have reached out and patted Pulg's bald pate. The small man in gray felt a certain satisfaction or rather relief—if Pulg had for some time been a secret Issek-worshipper, then his feyness might be explained. At the same time a gust of emotion akin to pity went through him. Looking down at his left hand the Mouser discovered that he had taken out of its secret pocket the gold bauble he had filched from Fafhrd. He was tempted to put it softly in Pulg's palm. How fitting, how soul-shaking, how *nice* it would be, he thought, if at the moment the floodgates of religious emotion burst in him, Pulg were to receive this truly beautiful memento of the god of his choice. But gold is gold, and a black sloop requires as much upkeep as any other color yacht, so the Mouser resisted the temptation.

Bwadres threw wide his hands and continued, "With dry throats, oh, Issek, we thirst for thy Waters. With gullets burning and cracked, thy slaves beg for a single sip from thy Jug. We would ransom our souls for one drop of it to cool us in this evil city, damned by black bones. Oh, Issek, descend to us! Bring us! Bring us thy Waters of Peace! We need you, we want you. Oh, Issek, come!"

Such was the power and yearning in that last appeal that the whole crowd of kneel-

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ing worshippers gradually took it up, chanting with all reverence, louder and louder, in an unendingly repeated, self-hypnotizing response: "We want Issek! We want Issek!"

It was that mighty rhythmic shouting which finally penetrated to the small conscious core of Fafhrd's wine-deadened brain where he lay drunk in the dark, though Bwadres' remarks about dry throats and burning gullets and healing drops and sips may have opened the way. At any rate, Fafhrd came suddenly and shudderingly awake with the one thought in his mind: another drink—and the one sure memory: that there was some wine left.

It disturbed him a little that his hand was not still on the stone bottle under the edge of the bed, but for some dubious reason up near his ear.

He reached for the bottle and was outraged to find that he could not move his arm. Something or someone was holding it.

Wasting no time on petty measures, the large barbarian rolled his whole body over mightily, with the idea of at once wrenching free from whatever was holding him and getting under the bed where the wine was.

He succeeded in tipping the bed on its side and himself with it. But *that* didn't bother him, it didn't shake up his numb body at all. What *did* bother him was that he couldn't sense any wine nearby—smell it, see it squintily, bump his head into it . . . certainly not the quart or more he remembered having safeguarded for just such an emergency as this.

At about the same time he became dimly aware that he was somehow *attached* to whatever he'd been sleeping on—especially his wrists and shoulders and chest.

However his legs seemed reasonably free, though somewhat hampered at the knees, and since the bed happened to have fallen partly on the low table and with its head braced against the wall, the blind twist-and-heave he gave now actually brought him to his feet and the bed with him.

He squinted around. The curtained outer doorway was an oblong of lesser darkness. He immediately headed for it. The bed foiled his first efforts to get through, bringing him up short in a most exasperating manner, but by ducking and by turning edgewise he finally managed it, pushing the curtain ahead of him with his face. He wondered mud-

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dily if he were paralyzed, the wine he'd drunk all gone into his arms, or if some warlock had put a spell on him. It was certainly degrading to have to go about with ones wrists up about ones ears. Also, his head and cheeks and chin felt unaccountably chilly—possibly another evidence of black magic.

The curtain dragged off of his head finally and he saw ahead of him a rather low archway and—vaguely and without being at all impressed by them—crowds of people kneeling and swaying.

Ducking down again, he lumbered through the archway and straightened up. Torchlight almost blinded him. He stopped and stood there blinking. After a bit his vision cleared a little and the first person he saw that meant anything to him was the Gray Mouser.

He remembered now that the last person he had been drinking with was the Mouser. By the same token—in this matter Fafhrd's maggoty mind worked very fast indeed—the Mouser must be the person who had made away with his quart or more of midnight medicine. A great righteous anger flamed in him and he took a very deep breath.

So much for Fafhrd and what *he* saw.

What the *crowd* saw—the god - intoxicated, chanting, weeping crowd—was very different indeed.

They saw a man of divine stature strapped with hands high to a framework of some sort. A mightily muscled man, naked save for a loincloth, with a shorn head and face that, marble white, looked startlingly youthful. Yet with the expression on that marble face of one who is being tortured.

And if anything else were needed (truly, it hardly was) to convince them that here was the god, the divine Issek, they had summoned with their passionately insistent cries, then it was supplied when that nearly seven-foot-tall apparition called out in a deep voice of thunder:

"Where is the jug? WHERE IS THE JUG?"

The few people in the crowd who were still standing dropped instantly to their knees at that point or prostrated themselves. Those kneeling in the opposite direction switched around like startled crabs. Two score persons, including Bwadres, fainted, and of these the hearts of five stopped beating forever. At least a

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dozen individuals went permanently mad, though at the moment they seemed no different from the rest—including (among the twelve) seven philosophers and a niece of Lankhmar's High Overlord. As one, the members of the mob abased themselves in terror and ecstacy—groveling, writhing, beating breasts or temples, clapping hands to eyes and peering fearfully through hardly parted fingers as if at an unbearably bright light.

It may be objected that at least a few of the mob should have recognized the figure before them as that of Bwadres' giant acolyte. After all, the height was right. But consider the differences: The acolyte was full-bearded and shaggy-maned; the apparition was beardless and bald—and strangely so, lacking even eyebrows. The acolyte had always gone robed; the apparition was nearly naked. The acolyte had always used a sweetly high voice; the apparition roared harshly in a voice almost two octaves lower.

Finally, the apparition was bound—to a torture rack, surely—and calling in the voice of one being tortured for his Jug.

As one, the members of the mob abased themselves.

With the exception of the Gray Mouser, Grilli, Wiggin, and Quatch. They knew well enough who faced them. (Pulg knew too, of course, but he, most subtle-brained in some ways and now firmly converted to Issekianity, merely assumed that Issek had chosen to manifest himself in the body of Fafhrd and that he, Pulg, had been divinely guided to prepare that body for the purpose. He humbly swelled with the full realization of the importance of his own position in the scheme of Issek's reincarnation.)

His three henchmen, however, were quite untouched by religious emotions. Grilli for the moment could do nothing as Pulg was still holding his wrist in a grip of fervid strength.

But Wiggin and Quatch were free. Although somewhat dull-brained and little used to acting on their own initiative, they were not long in realizing that the giant had appeared who was supposed to be kept out of the way so that he would not queer the game of their strangely-behaving master and his tricky gray-clad lieutenant. Moreover, they well knew what jug Fafhrd was shouting for so

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angrily, and since they also knew they had stolen and drunken it empty, they likely also were moved by guilty fears that Fafhrd might soon see them, break loose, and visit vengeance upon them.

They cranked up their crossbows with furious haste, slapped in quarrels, knelt, aimed, and discharged the bolts straight at Fafhrd's naked chest. Several persons in the mob noted their action and shrieked at its wickedness.

The two bolts struck Fafhrd's chest, bounced off, and dropped to the cobbles—quite naturally enough, as they were two of the fowling quarrels (headed merely with little knobs of wood and used for knocking down small birds) with which the Mouser had topped off their quivers.

The crowd gasped at Issek's invulnerability and cried for joy and amazement.

However, although fowling quarrels will hardly break a man's skin, even when discharged at close range, they nevertheless sting mightily even the rather numb body of a man who has recently drunk numerous quarts of wine. Fafhrd roared in agony, punched out his arms convulsively, *and broke the frame-work to which he was attached.*

The crowd cheered hysterically at this further proper action in the drama of Issek which his acolyte had so often chanted.

Quatch and Wiggin, realizing that their missile weapons had somehow been rendered innocuous, but too dull-witted or wine-fuddled to see anything either occult or suspicious in the manner of that rendering, grabbed at their shortswords and rushed forward at Fafhrd to cut him down before he could finish detaching himself from the fragments of the broken bed —which he was now trying to do in a puzzled way.

Yes, Quatch and Wiggin rushed forward, but almost immediately came to a halt—in the very strange posture of men who are trying to lift themselves into the air by heaving at their own belts.

The shortswords would not come out of their scabbards. Mingol glue is indeed a powerful adhesive and the Mouser had been most determined that, however little else he accomplished, Pulg's henchmen should be put in a position where they could harm no one.

However, he had been able to do nothing in the way of

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pulling Grilli's fangs, as the tiny man was most sharp-witted himself and Pulg had kept him closely at his side. Now almost foaming at the mouth in vulpine rage and disgust, Grilli broke loose from his god-besotted master, whisked out his razor, and sprang at Fafhrd, who at last had clearly realized what was encumbering him and was having a fine time breaking the last pesky fragments of the bed over his knee or by the leverage of foot against cobble—to the accompaniment of the continuing wild cheers of the mob.

But the Mouser sprang rather more swiftly. Grilli saw him coming, shifted his attack to the gray-clad man, feinted twice and loosed one slash that narrowly missed. Thereafter he lost blood too quickly to be interested in attempting any further fencing. Cat's Claw is narrow and slightly curved but it cuts throats as well as any other dagger (though it does not have a barbed tip, as some literal-minded scholars have claimed).

The bout with Grilli left the Mouser standing very close to Fafhrd. The little man realized he still held in his left hand the golden representation of the Jug fashioned by Fafhrd, and that object now touched off in the Mouser's mind a series of inspirations leading to actions that followed one another very much like the successive figures of a dance.

He slapped Fafhrd backhanded on the cheek to attract the giant's attention. Then he sprang to Pulg, sweeping his left hand in a dramatic arc as if conveying something from the naked god to the extortioner, and lightly placed the golden bauble in the supplicating fingers of the latter. (One of those times had come when all ordinary scales of value fail—even for the Mouser—and gold is—however briefly—of no worth.) Recognizing the holy object, Pulg almost expired in ecstacy.

But the Mouser had already skipped on across the Street. Reaching Issek's coffer-altar, beside which Bwadres was stretched unconscious but smiling, he twitched off the garlic bag and sprang upon the small cask and danced upon it, hooting to further attract Fafhrd's attention and then pointing at his own feet.

Fafhrd saw the cask, all right, as the Mouser had intended he should, and the giant did not see it as anything to do with Issek's col-

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lections (the thought of all such matters was still wiped from his mind) but simply as a likely source of the liquor he craved. With a glad cry he hastened toward it across the Street, his worshippers scuttling out of his way or moaning in beatific ecstacy when he trod on them with his naked feet. He caught up the cask and lifted it to his lips.

To the crowd it seemed that Issek was drinking his own coffer—an unusual yet undeniably picturesque way for a god to absorb his worshippers' cash offerings.

With a roar of baffled disgust Fafhrd raised the cask to smash it on the cobbles, whether from pure frustration or with some idea of getting at the liquor he thought it held is hard to say, but just then the Mouser caught his attention again. The small man had snatched two tankards of ale from an abandoned tray and was pouring the heady liquid back and forth between them until the high-piled foam trailed down the sides.

Tucking the cask under his left arm—for many drunkards have a curious prudent habit of absent-mindedly hanging onto things, especially if they may contain liquor—Fafhrd set out again after the Mouser, who ducked into the darkness of the nearest portico and then danced out again and led Fafhrd in a great circle all the way around the roiling congregation.

Literally viewed it was hardly an edifying spectacle—a large god stumbling after a small gray demon and grasping at a tankard of beer that just kept eluding him—but the Lankhmarians were already viewing it under the guise of two dozen different allegories and symbolisms, several of which were later written up in learned scrolls.

The second time through the portico Issek and the small gray demon did not come out again. A large chorus of mixed voices kept up expectant and fearful cries for some time, but the two supernatural beings did not reappear.

Turning back to a dawn exactly three years earlier we find the Gray Mouser and Fafhrd clambering from a cranky leaky skiff into the cockpit of a black sloop moored beyond the Great Mole that juts out from Lankhmar and the east bank of the River Hlal into the Inner Sea. Before coming aboard, Fafhrd first handed up Issek's cask to

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the impassively sallow-faced Ourph. Then all three bent to the task of upping anchor and making sail.

As soon as the salty wind was driving them directly away from the land and Lankhmar, the Mouser turned quickly to Issek's cask and its loot. In the dusk his fingers could not find a coin-slit. When he upended the heavy object it did not even jingle. Eager to open it before Fafhrd could protest, the Mouser raised a heavy hatchet he had taken from the sloop's tool rack and bashed in a section of wood.

There was a spray of stingingly aromatic fluid of most familiar odor. Brandy . . . to the absolute top so it had not gurgled. And then, as the day grew brighter, the Mouser noticed a somewhat burnt inscription on one end of the cask: "Dear Pulg—Drown your sorrows in this—Bashabek."

In thinking back it was only too easy to realize how yesterday afternoon the Number Two Extortioner had had a perfect opportunity to effect the substitution.

Then, for the first time in many months, Fafhrd and the Mouser really looked at each other. There was an odd shyness in both their gazes—each had the sudden thought that he had taken his friend away from the lifepath he had chosen in Lankhmar, perhaps the life-path best suited to his treading.

The Mouser laughed a little self-consciously. "I have no regrets for Lankhmar," he said, lying mightily, though not entirely. "I can see now that if I'd stayed I'd have gone the way of Pulg and all such Great Men—fat, power-racked, lieutenant-plagued, smothered with false-hearted dancing girls, and falling at last into the arms of religion. At least I'm saved that last chronic ailment, which is worse than the dropsy." He looked at Fafhrd narrowly. "But how of you, old friend? Will you miss Bwadres and your cobbled bed and your nightly tale-weaving?"

Fafhrd frowned as the sloop plunged on northward and the salt spray dashed him.

"Not I," he said at last. "There are always other tales to be woven. I served a god well, I dressed him in new clothes, and then I did a third thing. Who'd go back to being an acolyte after being so much more? You see, old friend, I really *was* Issek."

The Mouser arched his eyebrows. "You were?"

Fafhrd nodded twice, most gravely. **THE END**

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BOTTLE IT UP

By RON GOULART

He was handsome, virile and on the make. She was rich, available and bewitching. That was the only trouble.

HIS last performance was always over around one-thirty and he would meet her at the little Italian place next door for a drink. Ted Donner set his guitar case down next to the brass hatrack and walked across to their usual booth, nodding at the gray-haired bartender.

Karen Tatum smiled up at him. "Your second appearance was particularly good, Ted." Her face was just a little too round and broad to be really pretty.

Ted Donner smiled and slid into the booth across from her. "I think I'm improving." He reached across the checker-topped table and picked up Karen's silver cigarette case.

"I had a talk with Eddie between shows and he says he'll keep you on two more weeks at least," Karen said, brushing back her long dark hair.

"That's fine," said Donner.

The bartender brought them two cappuccinos on a black tray.

Donner moved his hand toward his wallet.

"On the tab, Victor," Karen said.

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The old man smiled and walked away. Donner had the feeling the bartender suspected them of being lovers. "Well, cheers," Donner said. But the glass was still a little too hot to pick up. He didn't like cappuccino much anyway. He could wait.

Karen sipped hers. "Very pleasant," she said. "I think in a few months you'll be ready for places like the Hungry I and even Bimbo's."

Donner grinned. "Maybe. No more charity bazaars and county fairs anyway."

Karen shook her head. "No. Not with me looking after your career." She circled her glass with both hands, looking thoughtful. Her fingers were plump and the emerald ring she wore cut a black line.

"You know how much I appreciate this all, Karen," said Donner, looking away. Three men in tuxedoes came in and hurried up to the bar.

"I had a talk with your landlady this afternoon," Karen said, taking a cigarette out of her case.

Donner held out his lighter. "I hope you told her how much I like the place. It's quite an improvement over the guest house."

"I've always liked Pacific Heights," Karen said, steadying his hand with hers. "Thanks. Especially with a view like yours."

Nodding, Donner leaned back. "I really appreciate the place."

"Uncle Henry left for New York this morning."

"Oh? Kind of sudden."

"It's like that in his business."

Donner didn't know what the business was, but he nodded understandingly.

"He'll be gone six months or more," Karen said, exhaling smoke down at the table top. "I think it would be simpler if you lived in our place from now on, Ted."

Donner picked up his glass. "Well, if you think so. Are you sure it won't be any trouble?"

The girl laughed softly. "Don't worry. Our relationship remains the same. I just want to have you around more. Even watching you do three shows a night doesn't satisfy me." Her sigh sounded fairly real. "It's funny, Ted. You're one of the first things I've really been able to keep up an interest in. Over any long period." Her nose always wrinkled when she said things like this.

"Two months," said Donner, turning his head at the sound of one of the tuxedoed

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men slipping off his stool to the floor. "That's not so long."

"It is for me," said Karen. She ground out her cigarette in an ashtray with a picture of Venice in its bottom. "All your things are moved. Records, books, clothes. So you can come with me now."

"How'd you get it done so quick?" Donner said, watching her draw on her black gloves."

"Nothing to it."

The bartender was helping the fallen man up, but he paused to smile at Donner and Karen as they left.

"Would you mind driving?" Karen said, taking his arm.

Donner moved his guitar from between them. "Fine," he said.

Donner stood at the window of his large bedroom and watched the bay. There was San Francisco stretched out white and flat beyond the water. A couple dozen bright sailboats arcing away from the Gate. Donner smiled and went into his den. He took a stack of 78's off a shelf and put them on the automatic changer of the hi-fi set.

Lighting a cigarette he sat back in a bucket chair with his feet up on the marble-topped coffee table. He half-closed his eyes and listened carefully to the blues singers that slapped one by one onto the turntable. Donner was aware that he could never approach any of these men as far as quality went. But it was a good idea for a night club folk singer to have some obscure blues numbers in his repertoire.

He got up to play a song called *Bottle It Up And Go* over again. It might be something audiences could sing along with. Not another *On Top Of Old Smokey,* but something catchy. Maybe he'd suggest getting a tape recorder to Karen so all the 78's could be put on tape. Actually, that was a safer, more convenient way to do things.

"Karen wants to know if you'd like a gin fizz on the patio," said a dignified voice behind him.

Donner clicked off the phonograph and turned. "Beg pardon?"

A round orange cat was sitting on Donner's guitar case, its tail swishing. "I said, Karen wonders if you'd join her for a gin fizz in the patio. It's pretty pleasant out this morning. I recommend it."

"What kind of fizz?" said Donner, backing toward his bedroom door. Once in bed he could go to sleep again and forget everything.

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The cat grinned. "I'm sorry I didn't get to meet you when you moved in. I was chasing a partridge and I just got back today. My name's Chesh."

"Chesh?" After two tries Donner found the doorknob.

"Short for Cheshire Cat. A little precious. That's Karen for you."

Donner remembered that one cappuccino should not cause a hangover. Not one like this. He walked slowly over to his guitar case and patted the cat's head. It was real and it purred. "Karen's in the patio you say?"

The cat nodded. "By the pool. I'll be down in awhile. But I've got a new ball of yarn I want to worry first."

"Fine, Chesh." Donner went into the bedroom and picked out a pair of plaid trunks. He put them on and found a clean sweat shirt.

Karen's skin didn't tan. She lifted a deep pink arm in greeting when she saw Donner. Adjusting her harlequin sunglasses she stretched out in a lounging chair. "Nice morning."

Donner noticed the fresh silver fizz on the metal table next to Karen. He picked it up. "Karen, I think I've lost my mind."

Karen was very still for a moment and then she started laughing. "You met Chesh?"

"There is a cat?"

"Yes. And he talks."

Donner sat down at the edge of the pool and took off his tennis shoes. "Well, why is that, Karen?"

"I'm sorry he scared you, Ted. I suppose I should have found another way to tell you about my uncle and me."

"Just what?"

Karen came over and sat next to him. "Uncle Henry and I are very secure financially, Ted. That's why I've been able to take such an interest in your career."

Donner watched the pattern the sunlight made in the water. "And I appreciate it."

"I know, Ted. The point is that we earn our living with magic."

"I didn't know your uncle was in show business."

Karen smiled. "Not that kind of magic. Real magic. Spells, hexes, teleportations. Things in that line. There aren't really too many good wizards these days and so it pays very well. Of course, I help Uncle Henry."

"You mean, all your money comes from what you and your uncle earn by magic?"

"That and some investments. Uncle Henry's very good at predicting stock rises

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and such." She glanced at Donner. "I hope you don't mind being backed up by money that was earned by black magic. I felt I should tell you sooner or later."

Donner let himself drop down into the pool slowly. When he came up he caught the rail and looked at Karen. "Not at all. Business is business."

She smiled. "I'm glad you feel that way. That it's not important."

Donner relaxed in the water. "I tell you, Karen. What's important to me is having a fairly comfortable position in life. And, of course, my singing."

"That's important to me, too," said Karen. "You are, after all, the only person I've been able to stay interested in. I'm usually so—well—changeable."

"I understand," said Donner. "And I appreciate it all. Really, Karen."

"I'm very glad you can accept this all."

"Of course, I can." He pushed off from the side of the pool and began swimming away from Karen. "I'm pretty adaptable."

After he had driven the gray Mercedes into the garage and turned off the ignition Donner sat back. He smoked a half a cigarette before he got his guitar out of the back seat and went across the gravel path to the house.

Karen, wearing a quilted blue robe, was sitting in the living room near the long window. Only one bulb in the floor lamp was on. Karen smiled faintly, turning her pale face toward him.

"Feeling better?" Donner asked, dropping his guitar case in the hall.

"Much. Uncle Henry has never quite figured out the common cold. But the potion he invented is fairly effective. Would you play something?"

Donner leaned in the doorway. "Well, I'm a little tired. But okay."

"How was the audience?"

Donner unsnapped the fasteners around the case lid. "Fair."

"I'm glad I was able to get you into *The Snapping Cat.* It's a step up for you. Don't you feel that?"

Bringing his guitar into the room Donner nodded. "Yes, I do. And I appreciate it." He sat down on the low sofa, resting one foot on a hassock.

"Did that girl with the off-key voice go over any better tonight?"

"Jay? She's not a bad singer. Hell, she's only a couple

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months out of college. I think she's pretty good."

Karen frowned. "I suspected as much."

"Huh?" Donner found the guitar was still in tune.

"I suppose that's why you are late. You stopped and had a drink with that flat-chested Betty Hutton."

The mantel clock said two-thirty. "It's the time we usually get home."

"But I was here sick. If you didn't stop any place why did it take you just as long?"

Donner dropped the guitar down between his legs. "As a matter of fact, I did have a beer with Jay. Some drunk Shriner heckled her at the second show and she was upset."

"A beer," Karen said, her nose wrinkling. "Well, that's fine. I knew that was it."

"Oh? Do you have a crystal ball, too?"

Karen stood up. "Don't make fun of us. Or what we do."

"It's a living," Donner said. "But just leave me alone about things like this."

"You know where you'd be if I hadn't taken an interest in you?"

"In the gutter? That's how the cliché goes, isn't it?"

Karen picked up a pink kleenex and blew her nose. "Don't be sarcastic, Ted." She sat down slowly. "You'd be playing *The Blue Tail Fly* at lettuce growers' picnics. Or at benefits, like that one for the Young Democrats."

"You're sentimental at heart, Karen. Remembering our first meeting. And it's over three months ago."

Karen brought her fingertips together. "I'd rather you didn't have anything to do with this Jay."

"Now, look, Karen. As far as my career goes you can tell me anything you like. I do appreciate your financing me like this. Gambling on my success. And I hope I'll be able to pay you back."

"It's no gamble, Ted. You amuse and entertain *me*. I'm not losing anything. Even if you don't become a success."

"Okay," said Donner. He rested his guitar on his knee. "But I understand our relationship to be only a business one. I wish you wouldn't worry about other things."

"I'm not jealous," Karen said. "Sleep with this scrawny Ethel Merman. But I don't want you dawdling around with her when you should be here. Will you play something?"

Donner sat the guitar on the cushion next to him and

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took off his sport coat. "Warm," he said. Something rustled in the coat pocket. "Oh, is Chesh around? They had some fish hors d'oeuvres left over and I brought him some." He took a small white paper bag out of his coat. Suddenly the sack jumped into the air and vanished with a pop.

"Play something," said Karen, leaning on her chair arm. "I had to get rid of Chesh. He was getting on my nerves."

"Oh," said Donner. He picked up his guitar and played a couple of flemenco numbers he'd learned from a Carlos Montoya record.

Karen removed the bathing cap and shook out her long black hair. The bright sun brought out the pink of her skin. "Well, I suppose I can let you borrow the car. I was thinking, though, that since the club is closed tonight we could just sit around at home here. I could fix dinner and then you could play some things for me."

Donner was under water during part of this speech, but he caught the tone of it. He climbed out of the pool and grabbed up a large white terry towel. "I can hike into Sausalito I suppose and catch a bus. I guess they run a bus out on Sundays. Sure, they must."

Karen tilted her head in the direction of the metal table and two gin fizzes appeared. "Drink?"

Donner hesitated. "Well, fine. Thanks."

"You're going to meet this Jay?"

Donner sat down in a deck chair, balancing his glass on his knee. "Yes. There's a movie we want to see."

Karen sighed. "I thought The Snapping Cat was a step up for you. Now I'm wondering."

Donner looked away. "I don't want to argue or anything, Karen."

"I noticed an empty place on Broadway near Columbus," Karen said, moving nearer to him.

"A parking place?"

"No, I mean a building. A place that could be opened as a bar."

"Oh?"

"Does that interest you?"

"Real estate never much fascinated me."

Karen knelt down on the towel he had dropped near his chair. "A place we could open. I think I can get a liquor license fairly easy. If not, we can sell beer and wine. Maybe just run an espresso house."

"Not espresso," said Don-

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ner. "Every boheme over in North Beach is putting in an espresso machine."

"All right, no espresso." Karen laughed and looked up at him. "Do you like the idea, though? Our own club?"

"It's fine. The financial end bothers me. What about that?"

"I can certainly afford a club."

"If it failed. Might take me a long time to pay you back."

"Don't worry. It wouldn't fail. I'd see to that."

"How?"

"I've told you I've picked up a lot of tricks from Uncle Henry." She bit her thumb and then said, "Sometimes if you just concentrate hard enough you can simply will people to come into a place. Even to like your decor and order drinks. And your entertainment."

"You mean to hypnotize them?"

"In a way. Uncle Henry and I like to call it telepathic advertising."

Donner stood up. "I don't like that idea, Karen. A club, maybe. Someday. But not this other stuff." He walked to the edge of the pool. Slowly he turned and eyed the kneeling girl. "Karen?"

"Yes, Ted."

"Have you used any of this stuff before? To make people hire me. Or come and see me and applaud."

"You're sure of your own talent, aren't you?"

"Certainly. Well, more or less. Nobody's ever all sure, all the time. Karen, did you?"

"I enjoy your playing and singing. Very much. Forget what I said, Ted."

"Damn it, Karen."

Karen's hand moved in the air and then something jingled and flashed in it. She threw Donner the keys to the Mercedes. "Go ahead into the city. I think I'll get to work on planning our club."

Donner let the keys hit the green tile. He watched Karen for a moment, then stooped and picked them up.

It was raining and the rumpus room was gray around the edges. Karen, smiling, pointed at the model on the ping-pong table. It was a scale model of the proposed night club, and filled all the table on one side of the net.

Donner looked down into the roofless club, poked at the small stage with his finger. There was even a small model mike. As Donner moved his hand the microphone made an odd sound. "Does that little thing work?"

"Oh, yes," said Karen. "It's

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a working model. All of it. With a knack for carpentry and a little black magic you can do quite a lot."

Donner tried to convey admiration with a look. He stooped further and inspected the dressing rooms. Against a miniature make-up table leaned a small guitar, about five inches high. "Fine," said Donner.

Karen came up beside him. "I've been thinking, Ted. I'd like to see your career advance and all that. Basically, though, I enjoy you as a source of entertainment for myself."

The rain was sliding down the side of the house and splashing on the patio stones. "Maybe a club isn't a good idea then."

"No, it's quite a fine idea. I think it will be a lot more convenient. No more trips over the bridge. And since I'll run the place you'll perform every night, no day off. And no ingenue singers to take up your time."

"You're going to build the club near here? In Sausalito?"

Karen shook her head and crossed to a cupboard. She took out a model of a cottage and came back. She put the cottage on the clear side of the ping-pong table and went to open the French window leading to the patio. A cold wind came in. "In good weather we can keep both out here. Bad days it'll be the table, I guess."

Donner reached into his pocket for a cigarette. "Could you close the door, Karen?"

"You'll have the use of the patio. Nothing more than that at present. Uncle Henry came up with a fine magic circle, or force fields as they call them nowadays. That will keep you from running off or getting lost."

"Getting lost?"

"Yes," said Karen, shutting the french window and pointing at him. "Because you'll only be ten inches high. I figured out the scale."

Donner blinked and started to speak, but he became dizzy and found that his mouth wouldn't open. He sank to the floor and then passed out.

The sparrows didn't bother him. Probably Karen had fixed that up. Donner stretched out on the deck chair and glanced up at the zinnias, bright in the sun. Drinking his gin and tonic he wondered how much gin was in it.

He set his glass aside and closed his eyes. He almost smiled, he was almost adjusted to it. The whole thing was ridiculous, but not as bad as he had expected. Karen had

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reduced his books and records for him. The cottage was the best place he'd ever lived in.

The meals were good. Food always appeared on the dining room table at the right times. No dishes to do. Performing every night was a slight strain. He could sleep late in the mornings.

Ridiculous situation? Maybe. He had a fine place to live, a chance to perform. That's what every artist wanted. Every folk singer. Security.

Donner sat up. The security thing was a slight problem. Karen was pretty unstable. Maybe she'd get tired of him.

Well, then she'd probably just unshrink him and turn him loose.

About that cat Karen had had. Had she just unmagiced it and turned it loose? Somehow, Donner felt she hadn't been that kindly about Chesh.

He grinned and stretched. Nothing to worry about. He was, after all, the one person Karen was fond of. Not so much for his personality as for his singing and playing.

Something was banging in the rumpus room.

Karen'd been a little restless the night before while he was on. Girls get that way now and then.

Donner locked his hands behind his head and smiled into the sun.

The banging became more rapid and then it stopped. A moment later the rumpus room door slammed.

Donner got curious and went inside. He wandered around the room. Nothing seemed different. Probably Karen had been patching something up.

The stroll around the room had tired him out and he decided to take a shower. The weather had been bad the night before and his cottage and the club were still up on the ping-pong table. He hurried up the ladder.

After his shower he felt fine. He had discovered a new way to sing *Careless Love* while he was soaping his back. When he was dressed he got his guitar and headed for the club to practice.

He slid his case under the net and climbed over. He stopped a few steps from the club entrance. Then he put his guitar case down and sat on it. He looked up at the neat white sign that had been nailed up next to the entrance.

"Doesn't mean anything," he said. "Things are still fine." He remained sitting, watching the sign.

It said: Closed Mondays.

THE END

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GRAYGORTCH

By DON WILCOX

Where does the macabre end and pure horror begin? Is death itself the answer? Or do the shades that lie beyond it bring greater terror to the human mind? Whatever the answer, we present here a story in this genre; one that might well have come from the pen of Edgar Allan Poe.

WE WAIT beneath the window of his office. We wait, untouched by the rain, we who are shadows. We see him look out at the blackness of the downpour. We know he broods, for he has not forgot . . .

Graygortch lingered late in his office, looking out at the rain. He scowled down at the strange newsboy who stood huddled like a wet duck under the edge of the marquee, two floors below, languidly selling his papers.

Graygortch hated rain. He moved restlessly from the window. His eyes played over the surface of the desk ornament, which stared back at him vacantly. It was a human skull, mounted on a black marble base, and on rainy nights it gave off a certain glow.

It was the skull of Melton, one of the last men Graygortch had killed before he returned from Africa.

"You need a light, Mr. Graygortch?" The little old woman who cleaned the office looked in. Ugly chrone. Always making some stupid effort to be friendly. She switched on his light and then went away.

Now Graygortch's reflection glared back at him from the window. Through the montage of streaming traffic lights his reflected eyes shone, dark balls of fire within heavy drooping lids. He was aware of the strength of his blunt features, thick-muscled shoulders, powerful arms that knew how to lash

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whips over the backs of lagging workers. The African mines had given full play to his talents. But now. Now the life of a pampered parlor cat. Sickeningly soft. Plush office. Black business suit. Owner of mines. Rich. With a pretense of good manners. His powerful shoulders were wasting. The image in the window mocked him.

"You need light, Mr. Graygortch." The cleaning woman was back. "You can't work without light. Strain your eyes."

"Turn it off."

"You want it off, Mr. Graygortch?" She turned the light off. "Am I too early, Mr. Graygortch?"

"Keep your damn furniture polish off my skull." He pointed to the desk ornament. "It's turning yellow."

"That yellow, that's on account of age, Mr. Graygortch. Or either it's an imitation."

"It's no imitation."

"It's a hundred years old, I expect."

"It's five years old. Five years today."

"O-oh!"

"And keep your grimy hands off."

"I will, Mr. Graygortch. I will." She made a sort of bow. Ugly old witch. Graygortch walked around the desk and put on his all-weather coat and an old gray felt hat. He took the elevator down.

He ignored the elevator man's, "Good night, Mr. Graygortch," and walked out of the building.

Under the marquee he paused. The strange newsboy was still there, standing at the edge of the downpour.

"Paper?"

Graygortch tried to hail a taxi.

"Paper, Mr. Graygortch?"

"How'd you know my name? . . . You and your water-soaked papers! Who dredged you up out of the sewer? Get out of my doorway."

The boy backed away. Or was he a boy? He looked more like a little old man. With curiously crinkled yellowish eyes. A thin cackling voice. "Please buy a paper, Mr. Graygortch."

Graygortch brushed past him, flung a hand as if to slap him, but snatched the paper instead. A taxi drew up and he opened the door, swung in, and sped off. He barely glanced back to see the yellow-eyed little man standing there, hand extended, as if still waiting for his money. The marquee became

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A cry—"Let the play go on"—spewed from hideous throats.

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a blur in the neon-lighted rain, and Graygortch scrunched back in his seat. He opened the paper and stared.

Passing lights revealed the headline.

Two words. Nothing else. It was not a newspaper, it was a piece of parchment, and the black-lettered message read: "GRAYGORTCH CHOSEN."

We taxi him through the rain and fog. His eyes reveal confusion. Our message, our two-word message. Reminder of the past! Reminder of our African chief, Bozizo. But little does he guess, as yet, the powers of the dead! . . .

The taxi drove off the artery, onto a side street that led nowhere.

"Back to my office!" Graygortch commanded for the third time. His voice had gone tight. "Back to Nineteenth. Make another right. That yellow-eyed devil—turn right—right, you numbskull! This is a dead end. Can't you read? It goes straight into the mountain. Stop, you idiot!"

The taxi accelerated. The black mountainside loomed in the steamy rain. The car plunged through a gap in the barrier. Thick fog. The mountain wall engulfed the yellow headlights. Some sort of unlighted passageway drew them in. Graygortch had the feeling of being whooshed into a pneumatic tube. No use wasting breath on the driver now. No chance of turning around in this place. It must be some old tunnel to the ocean road. Graygortch sat tight. He imagined he saw a blob of blue somewhere ahead. It kept receding. Deeper and deeper into the tunnel.

"Driver! Get me out of this! Do you hear? Back to my office. Driver!"

Graygortch reached to shake the fellow by the shoulders. The horn blared. It stuck. Noise roared from the walls.

"Stop that damn thing! Stop it!"

His hand struck out. His grip locked on the back of the driver's neck, tightened, froze. This was not human flesh. There was no driver. This was a dummy stuffed into clothing. It sagged away from the wheel and fell to the side. The car rushed on, choosing its own path. Down the open tunnel. Accelerating down the long grade. With a frenzied curse Graygortch dived into the front seat,

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seized the wheel. His feet jammed for the brake. It didn't work. Nothing responded to his touch. He couldn't even stop the noise of the horn.

Birds came flying into the headlights. Gull-like birds, black and silver. Ten or twelve—then scores. Over the car they swerved. They crashed into the lights. They split the windshield. Their death-squawks shrilled above the wail of the horn. The tunnel was suddenly filled with flapping wings. Thousands. Through breaking glass they burst in upon Graygortch. Then the car stopped, clogged by the jungle of batting wings. No more lights. Motor and horn faded and died.

Blackness.

Blackness and the afterimage of black and silver wings. And now the sounds of flapping waned. The birds must be rising. Or the car sinking.

The dash was dead. Graygortch tried to strike a light. Even his cigarette lighter refused to function.

For minutes he waited in the darkness, still with the strange feeling that he was sinking. An illusion? He would get out. He would walk back through the tunnel. He would return to his building and find that yellow-eyed man and demand to know the source of that baleful message . . .

We wedge the wheeled conveyance in the earth. Trembling with shock, our guest commands his feet . . . Now, will he fall with us? Will he come with us, down through unknown dimensions? A world of shadows waits, somewhere beneath . . . down . . . down . . . down . . .

Graygortch breathed hard. The air pressure had changed. The smell of the air—he could have sworn he was back in the African mines. He felt as if he had fallen obliquely over oceans and continents, and all in utter blackness. But now his feet stood solid upon a rocky path. Again he tried to strike a light. The cigarette lighter refused to spark. In disgust he flung it aside, heard it bounce off the surface of rocks. From the chain of echoes he guessed that he was in a vast cavern . . . New, yet old . . . The familiar smell of the mines . . .

His nerves quivered. Distinctly he heard the faint cackle of a man's voice sounding through the coal blackness. He turned and

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thought he saw, for an instant, the glow of those crinkly yellow eyes . . .

The eyes came closer. And the voice. "We got you here safe, Mr. Graygortch. It wasn't easy. Our chief, Bozizo, has waited five years. He wanted to be sure—"

Graygortch slashed at the eyes with his fists. He struck nothing. The voice stopped short, however, and the two little triangles of luminous yellow disappeared. Again, only blackness and silence.

Cautiously Graygortch attempted to walk. He stumbled. He crouched. He felt his way over the stones he couldn't see. The echoes of his steps told him he was moving toward one of the cavern walls. He listened.

Whispers. Low voices, very near. Then a voice spoke up—a voice he had not heard for five years—a low, rumbling voice, thick with accent.

"You've come, Master Graygortch."

It was the voice of Bozizo, the chief.

Graygortch responded very nervously. "You're not alive. You can't be. You died—you and Melton—on the same day—"

"You've come, and we welcome you." Slow, heavy words. Bozizo always spoke as though there were other listeners in hiding. "In our shadow world we wait for you. We desire entertainment. A drama from the past. We have chosen you for our hero."

"Hero! Where am I? This is all a hoax. Who are you, there in the dark, and where did you get that voice?"

"You have come here to be the hero of a play—"

"I'll meet you in a fair fight any day—in the light!"

"You mean you cannot see? But you will, soon—"

"If I had a whip—"

"The first act of our play does not call for a whip," Bozizo said calmly. "Only a long pole with a fork in the end. Remember?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The audience in the shadows understands. They are watching each move you make. Hear them whisper? For five years they have talked of you and have waited. They want to see the great Graygortch re-enact the past. Graygortch, the white master with the shoulders . . . Ah, now you begin to see? The purple lights seep through the blackness. Do you not see the edge of the river?"

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"I see it," Graygortch said. The lines of purple that became visible through the blackness formed a pattern that matched a long-forgotten memory. "Yes, I see the river. This is the path, and here is the edge."

"And you are the hero, the man of steel, the man everyone must obey. What do you see in the river?"

"A swimmer," said Graygortch. "He's swimming the flood waters—"

"To bring you a message?"

"Yes . . . yes, I remember . . ."

"He is a native from my tribe. He has risked his life to bring you the message, obeying my order. See him come near? Listen!"

Sounds of the flooding river. Of a swimmer approaching. His garbled shouting. The message.

Then Bozizo, again, at Graygortch's side. "You did not like the message. It angered you. So what did you do? Here is the forked pole. You are the hero. Play your part."

Graygortch started to protest. "There's no need—"

"We are only shadows, Graygortch. You cannot hurt us. Not now. Take the forked pole. He's about to reach our shore—"

"There's no need—"

"There was never any need. But you are the hero, and so you indulge your slightest anger. Act!"

Graygortch moved to the edge of the purple stream and plunged the fork over the neck of the approaching swimmer. The gasping for breath was muffled.

Bozizo said. "That's right, don't let him come up. He won't struggle long. He's already exhausted . . . There, just as you did it in real life . . . Hear the bubbles?"

Yet even as we traced the steps of murders past and gone, his name was named above. The living world above remarked his former legal name. WANTED: L. T. Gray . . . Lawrence Gray . . .

The tall man with thinning brown hair paused at the door of one of the cubicles where a plump girl sat at a desk, writing. She was dressed in a crisp white blouse and dark blue skirt, and her handwriting was neat and round. She was penning careful notes in the upper right hand corners of a set of papers from the files.

"Getting all the old ones classified?" the supervisor asked in a friendly manner.

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"Quite a dusty job. Excuse me if I take a moment to check on your progress . . . Any difficulties? How about this one?"

"I wasn't sure where to place it. It's one of the incompletes." The girl pointed to the typed notations on the back of the sheet. "Apparently he left the country and went to Africa twenty years ago."

"H-m-m . . . Have you tried case L-28 for a possible follow-up?"

"There was nothing. Not under the name of Lawrence Gray."

The supervisor's eyes lingered on the girl for a moment, then returned to the papers. "Perhaps I'll find time to give you a little assistance on the tough ones. What do we have, here? Police record: Eight arrests. Three imprisonments. Always good behavior in prison. But the motives?"

"They evidently never bothered to find out."

"It isn't always easy," you know."

"I'm new at this," the girl said hesitantly, but if I may offer a suggestion—"

"Certainly, Miss Johnson."

"What I mean is, if he's been gone twenty years, why don't we throw it out altogether?"

"Oh, my dear Miss Johnson!" The supervisor straightened. "The superintendent wants some sort of interpretation for every case. Not just the easy ones. That's the whole point. Ah—m-m-m, just hold this case with the unclassified items. Maybe we can catch him under another name."

"Catch him?" She raised a teasing eyebrow.

"Statistically speaking." He lowered his voice to imply a faint reprimand. "Our department is not interested in apprehending, you know. Merely in classifying. Carry on, Miss Johnson."

The scenes play on . . . The natives in the mines . . . the work . . . the sweat . . . the lash . . . always the lash . . . the shoulders and arms of Graygortch, known to us all, even to me, the water boy, the dwarf with the cackling voice and the yellow eyes . . .

Now, before our eyes, he whips another of our brothers to death . . . We, the shadows of this realm, watch closely . . . What are his feelings? Is he reluctant to remember? Who can tell?

But now, out of our shadows, comes Graygortch's

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friend named Melton . . . Melton, small of frame, large of heart . . . sensitive, cool . . . Melton, the quiet man of reason . . .

"Graygortch, have you killed another man with the whip?"

The voice of Melton! It was only a play, a play of shadows, yet Graygortch stood trembling, hearing once again the voice. A nudge from the chief reminded him this was his cue. Action. Gestures. Oh, yes, the fallen native at his feet. The whip at his side. And the words—they came to him unprompted. "I didn't kill him. And what difference if I did?"

"He's dying, obviously." Melton again.

And Graygortch, in a voice of unconcern. "He still breathes. He can live if he wants to. Maybe he'd rather die. Why not, if he can't work without starting fights? He's given the men trouble enough."

The light had changed from dense purple to highlights of red. The mountain wall showed black, edged with flakes of red. Black—the jungle, the river, the figures of natives moving into the compound. Across the red-lighted body of the fallen man, the streams of blood showed black.

The weird flame of red showed from Melton's deep-set eyes. A savage light in the eyes of a cultured man. Light that kindled memories for Graygortch . . . The English words, clear-spoken in a low-pitched voice — this was indeed Melton as if he were standing there alive, shaming Graygortch for the folly of a needless murder.

"He still breathes," Graygortch repeated heavily.

"He'll die."

"He deserves nothing at my hands."

"Your hands are deeply stained," Melton said. "Have you no feelings, Graygortch?"

"He had earned those lashes. He came along. I held the whip. I needed exercise." Graygortch paused. There must have been stronger words that could have been chosen. But these were enough to set the shadow audience whispering all along the slope above the river. They saw and heard everything, and they quieted hopefully at the soft words of Melton:

"This is wrong, Graygortch. If things were reversed—if they held the whip—"

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"They'd murder me in a minute."

"*Why?* With or without cause?"

"You have duties elsewhere, Melton," Graygortch said brusquely. "Don't let me detain you."

"Before I leave, I want you to assure me." Melton pointed to the form of the dying man. "Not again, Graygortch."

Then Melton was gone and Graygortch stood in silence, looking moodily at the black form at his feet. At his elbow Chief Bozizo prompted him. What next? Go on.

Graygortch looked about. In the darkness he discerned the vertical lines of a building, his headquarters at the edge of the compound. Riches had poured in. How well he remembered the fine clothing he had brought back from a trip to the coast. Badge of authority. Would any servant dare exercise the indecency to try on some of those clothes during Graygortch's absence?

Graygortch moved swiftly. He burst in upon the scene. There the sly fellow was, prancing about before a mirror in the new silks and serges. The shadow of the real, exactly as it had happened. He leaped back from the sight of Graygortch.

"You'll die for this!" Graygortch reached for the whip. No—not the whip! His promise to Melton! Instantly he called an order to one of his dependable men. "Call the tribe together. They'll see with their own eyes what happens to this sneak!"

A gentle prompting from Bozizo reminded Graygortch that a broad smile of mockery should cross his lips and he should utter the word, "Justice," with each speech. Then, as the shadowy tribe miraculously assembled, Graygortch explained. The punishment would match the crime. This brazen native—let him be stripped of his own fanciest possessions—the garb which nature had given him: his fine-grained skin, his thick-grown scalp. These would be taken for Graygortch's adornment.

Graygortch moved through the action from memory. He ascended to an elevated seat and waited. He listened for the cry of the servant, bound and helpless. The offender was scalped alive; then a band of skin was cut from his belly. Crude adornments for such a hero as Graygortch, but he voiced the opinion that the natives

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would remember. (And again Bozizo prompted: "A little more of the mouth of mockery should accompany the hero's brave words.")

Does Graygortch smile to himself with sadistic pleasure? Or do his guts contract with revulsion? Who knows? Why should he wince? The skin is not being cut from his body. The scalp is not being torn from his head. Need any such deeds tease him with remorse, now or ever? Who can tell? He is Graygortch, the man with the shoulders, the man with the whip. The man with the soul of lead. A conscience? Who knows?

The plump girl sitting at a desk looked up at the tall thin-haired man who had returned for a smile and another word about one of the unclassified cases.

She handed him the case of Lawrence Gray, saying, "How can anyone know whether this man had a conscience? And if he didn't have, how can the courts have considered him morally responsible?"

"A good question, Miss Johnson."

"There's so little in the record."

"Exactly."

"Apparently he had no feeling whatever for his victims."

"A psychopath, then, shall we say? It's the convenient dumping ground. The fact is, so often we simply can't get beneath the surface . . . Oh-oh, what's this?" The supervisor picked up the old photo of L. T. Gray and studied it. Carefully.

"Anything wrong?" Miss Johnson asked.

"H-m-m . . . Probably just my imagination—still—don't his eyes remind you of the picture in this morning's paper? It was a story of some businessman in one of the coast cities—"

"Who disappeared?"

"Yes — last night — under strange circumstances."

They turned through the morning paper and found the story of a taxi that had mysteriously plunged into an old mountain tunnel. *Driverless,* the article said. But a passenger had been recognized as the car turned off the pavement. A businessman named Graygortch, an owner of African mines. Soon after, the crashed taxi had been found, but Graygortch could not be located.

"There's a definite resemblance," Miss Johnson ob-

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served. "The eyes. The folds of the ears."

"I'd better show this to the superintendent," the supervisor said. "Come along, Miss Johnson."

A conscience? What is a conscience? Does it occupy space? Does it add to one's weight? Then let it walk on its own legs and be named Melton. Let it keep out from under foot. Graygortch wants no stumbling blocks in his patch. The path of the psychopath.

In the realm of shadows the scenes shifted. Graygortch hurried along a trail to a deep amber-lighted gorge. Amber-colored rocks showed through the blackness of the mountain walls. Here the company would commence new mining operations. But not without trouble. Their right to the land was disputed. A native tribe arrived, humans and pack animals and baggage, and claimed the right to build their village here.

They lived primitive lives.

They were a warlike tribe, no good for work. Their supplies were just what Graygortch needed. The easiest way would have been for Graygortch's lieutenants to shoot them down and take their goods.

Graygortch ordered that the firearms be made ready.

But Melton said no.

"No, Graygortch." The voice of Melton's shadow brought reality once again to the unforgotten past. "No, no firearms. You are rich, now, Graygortch. Buy off this tribe if you wish, but no more of shooting down in cold blood."

Graygortch scoffed. "I suppose you would walk fifty miles for Chief Bozizo in order to make our purchase legal."

"To save the lives of five hundred natives—yes. I'll go at once." Melton prepared for the hike.

When Melton was out of sight, Graygortch issued swift orders. Have the native tribe deposit their supplies at a convenient place. Have them come to a certain cave. They would be treated to a feast; they would be entertained by music from a tin phonograph. Then Graygortch would talk business with them.

Graygortch stood by and watched them enter the cave. Plenty of room for all, he said.

The opening to the cave was small and round. A large

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cat might have entered without difficulty, or a young lion, or an average-sized human being. Men and women and children entered, not knowing they were being crowded into an air-tight chamber in the mountain wall. The music of the tin phonograph drew them in. Baskets of food were passed through the opening. A feast by torchlight.

Graygortch and his men waited on the outside until all the tribe had entered except the last man. He was a huge man. His girth was too great for him to squeeze through the limited space. They forced him to try. His body was caught.

A plug of human flesh in the entrance!

He struggled helplessly.

Graygortch and his men were ready. They heaped loads of earth and rock over him. They released an avalanche from above. It roared down and buried all signs of the cave entrance. The entire tribe was locked within, to suffocate.

Graygortch stood gazing at the scene. So naturally had the avalanche come down that it appeared to have been an act of God.

At Graygortch's side was his prompter, the shadow of Bozizo, who said, "Would you like to see within, to know how they fought the walls with their nails? Or would you prefer to imagine it? Have you guessed what happened to heavy man who blocked their escape? . . . Your words are next, Graygortch."

"I don't remember what I'm supposed to say."

"You've forgotten? Your words were, 'Stupid ignorant lot.' "

"Stupid ignorant lot," Graygortch repeated.

The shadow of the chief nodded. Then, as if to lift Graygortch out of his reflections, he further prompted: "When your friend Melton returns he will ask where the tribe has gone, but you will not remember. However, you will note that all their supplies have been abandoned, and the way is clear for your new mining venture to proceed . . . Thus your riches increase . . ."

Graygortch stood, not moving, not revealing by so much as a flick of his sullen eyes what his feelings might be.

Our play has almost run its course, and yet . . . We the shadows of the realm of death still know not if our hero

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(hero, indeed!) ever felt remorse . . . but was there not hope . . . as long as there was Melton?

Rain. The blackness of the storm moved over the scene. Angry green clouds unleashed their furies. Sheets of rain knifed down through the black twisted arms of jungle trees. Flashes of green lightning jumped over the swirling surfaces of the black river.

Was the shadow audience still there, concealed among the dark olive-colored rocks, watching each move, listening for each word against the roar of the storm?

The thunders faded. The downpour settled into a solid hiss of rain, sifting down over the mountain walls, streaming in rivulets over the vines and roots. Graygortch watched moodily.

He had moved away from the scene of the buried cave a few minutes before the storm had begun. Now he stood within an alcove of rock.

Then—just as it had happened five years before—he discovered that both Melton and Chief Bozizo were standing only a few feet away, watching him. The chief, his old face revealing trouble and pain, was questioning Melton. Graygortch knew what they were talking about. The chief was trying to find out where the missing tribe had gone. And Melton, not knowing, was parrying the questions.

The glint of determination in the old chief's eyes was well remembered. So it had happened five years ago. With everything to fear, the savage native leader had sworn he would learn who—whether Graygortch or Melton or someone else—held the key to the mystery of five hundred native men, women and children, *missing!*

And so it was that Bozizo voiced the threat that might cost him his life. He would learn who was responsible if he had to follow them all the way to hell. And when he learned *who,* he would force the guilty one to re-enact his crime, if crime it be, to be seen by every human soul who had suffered pain at his hands.

Graygortch heard the threat, and gave back the steady eye to the glinting gaze of the old chief.

"You say you'll make the guilty one face his guilt?"

"If I have to pursue him to the shadow world beyond this life!"

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"What makes you so sure there's any guilt involved? It wouldn't be the first time the earth has swallowed up a tribe or a nation."

"What do you know, Graygortch?"

"Enough to lead you to the answer."

"Lead, then!"

Graygortch led them along the rain-filled path, over gushing springs, up through umbrella branches, up along a slippery path higher and higher along the face of the mountain wall. He climbed with avid determination.

"Lead on," Chief Bozizo said. "We can go where you go."

But Melton lagged behind when the way grew more perilous. Graygortch said, "Give him a hand."

He caught the suspicious look in the chief's eye. (In shadow, now, Bozizo was playing himself to perfection.) A suspicious look—yes! Graygortch had offered a suggestion that sounded like kindness to a fellow man. *Give him a hand.* The wise old chief, staying two steps back of Graygortch, faced him. "You go back and give him a hand yourself. I will not turn my back on you."

Graygortch's anger flared, but he said, "Forget it, Chief. He'll catch up."

They started on. Melton was not yet in sight. They had come far enough, Graygortch decided. The rocks were high here. No one would know. He turned suddenly, drawing his pistol, and shot the old chief through the heart.

Bozizo sank. The well-remembered sound of coughing. The breath of life went out of him. The same poisonous look of vengeance in the eyes, going closed. In the eyes of this shadow, re-enacting. Everything was as it had been.

Graygortch moved through the remainder of his act nervously. He lifted the fallen body and hurled it into the wilderness of jagged rocks below. He walked a few yards down the path until he saw Melton, plodding up the way slowly.

Melton called, "Where's Bozizo?"

"Ahead. Waiting for you. The path's slippery. We'll help you over."

"I heard a sound like a pistol shot."

"A rock fell."

"I hope that was all."

"What do you mean?"

Melton paused, breathing hard. "I don't like the look of this, Graygortch."

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"The light atmosphere's gone to your head."

"I've stuck by you, Graygortch—"

"Stop talking! Catch up!"

"Many's the time in these fifteen years that you'd have died for your rashness if I hadn't stuck by you. You'd have died a damn fool—a rash, gold-crazy, bloodthirsty damn fool—"

"Stop talking. You're light-headed."

"All right, I'll stop talking. But if you've brought Bozizo and me up here on a blind chase—"

"Get on! Get on! Up the path! He's waiting!"

Melton took a step ahead of Graygortch, stopped, called. *"Bozizo! . . . Bozizo!"* He turned to face Graygortch, and he held a pistol. "Listen to me, Graygortch—"

"Get on, blast you! What are you up to?"

"There's been foul play. Where is he? . . . You've killed him."

"Why you—Melton! Put it away. We trust each other. We always have."

"Something's happened. I can see it in those murderous eyes of yours."

"All right, Melton. Something *did* happen. He's down there in the rocks. He slipped—the same as anyone might slip—me—or you—anyone. See him? *Down there."*

With a sudden forward plunge Graygortch struck the hand that held the pistol. The weapon fell. Melton barely caught his balance, regained his footing. Graygortch reached as if to catch him, and pushed him over the edge. He fell.

He threshed wildly at the air through a forty-foot fall. He went through a break in a projecting crag. There he caught and hung suspended, kicking. His head was caught. His struggling body dangled free, but his head was fast.

Graygortch watched.

He was not dead. Not even unconscious. He was caught in such a way that he couldn't help himself with his arms.

Graygortch was seeing it all over again. Just as it had been imprinted indelibly in his mind. The rain. The sullen dark green cast of the whole world, clouds and mountain, and jungle area below. He crouched in the path and looked down for several minutes.

At last the voice of the prompter at his elbow reminded him that the play must be finished. "Climb

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down the rocks. He's waiting," said the low accented voice of the shadow of Chief Bozizo. "You have your knife in your pocket . . ."

Our play has run its course, and yet—watching through our simple shadowy eyes—we still know not whether he feels remorse. His conscience, if such it might be called, now rests, with hollow eyes, upon his office desk, mounted on a black marble base. Can any more be learned about how he is judged by living men? We listen:

"Gentlemen, this particular case which Miss Johnson lifted from our files has suddenly come into the spotlight, as you know, through a news story. We have now established that 'our' Lawrence Gray, whose active record here was closed twenty years ago, is the same Mr. Graygortch of the strange taxi news story, a very rich mine owner. Obviously he came back from Africa five years ago a changed man."

"Changed—how?" Around the conference table there was sure to be some skeptic who would ask such a question.

The superintendent himself volunteered a brief answer to the question:

"For one thing, he has become highly successful financially."

The skeptic again: "Does that mean he will not be prosecuted for any of the old crimes still hanging over him?"

"That is not our department, fortunately. But it's a fair guess that he won't be, even though we send a summary of our own record to the authorities. After all, he's a man of influence now. He can make himself felt in court and legislature. Though he was once a common criminal, he has long since graduated to the white collar level, where an offender's aberrations are almost inevitably exempt from the attentions of the criminal court, regardless of motives. As criminologists have pointed out, polite crime generally escapes criminal prosecution, no matter if, all told, it costs the public much more than the other kind."

"Then if Mr. Graygortch, alias Lawrence Gray, should be found alive—if he returns safely—we may assume that this record will be conveniently buried?"

"In all probability, yes. He is, by our accepted standards,

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a success. Need any more be said?" The superintendent concluded the conference on this note. The supervisor barely glanced at Miss Johnson, whose slight smile told him that she too recalled her own earlier suggestion that the record be dropped into discard.

Listening, we know that we —simple souls—simple shadows—need not expect our answers from these men. Learned men—yes. But the murdered native of a far-off world is easily forgot.

We see it plainly now. This world belongs to Graygortch. Step by step (murder by murder, theft by theft) he's won it.

Then let us return him to the surface and hurl him back into his den of worldly wealth . . . This done, we linger for a day or two to catch the aftermath . . . Then coming back at last to our own shadow world, we find ourselves a little wiser, a little more content, from the final words we overhear.

"Any further news about Mr. Graygortch?" It was the plump, neatly dressed Miss Johnson, asking the question of the friendly, casual supervisor.

"Nothing, I'm afraid, that clarifies his mysterious return. As you know, he was found early yesterday morning on the floor of his office. The window was broken in. From all appearances he had been hurled in from the street. The police have been unable to determine how it could happen. A second-floor window. The theory of a helicopter had been discussed.

"He's in a state of shock. They'll get nothing coherent out of him, I'm afraid. The scrub woman who found him reported that he was talking aloud, addressing his remarks to a skull that he held in his arm. I've no doubt the psychoanalysts among us will find some Freudian basis for his strange attachment to the skull."

"Is he to remain under observation in the psychiatric ward, then?"

The supervisor nodded his assurance on this point. "From all appearances he'll be there for a long time to come. They say that in spite of twenty-four hours of treatment for shock, sedatives and all, they still haven't been able to pry that skull loose from his grip. I suggest we keep his record on file for further developments, Miss Johnson." **THE END**

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ABE LINCOLN—ANDROID

By O. H. LESLIE

Come to this strange party—where George Washington will open the door—where Abraham Lincoln will take your hat and Carrie Nation will hand you a drink.

CONGRATULATIONS! I am pleased to inform you that you have just made a purchase which will reward you with priceless qualities of service and satisfaction. Your Handmaster Home-Robot has been designed and engineered to perform every domestic duty with thoroughness and dedication to detail, and given proper attention will remain a loyal and efficient servant for generations to come.

MODEL NO. H230957
QUALITY: Class A-1, Series 48
TYPE: Abraham Lincoln

The representatives of the American Historical Society arose from their chairs, shook hands gravely with Justin Mark, and played Alphonse and Gaston at the door of the lawyer's office.

Justin looked after them, amused yet impressed by their pointed dignity. Nevertheless, he didn't neglect the one caution he took with all new clients.

"Miss Lyons," he spoke into the Soundbox. His secretary came in, electric with efficiency. "Have this check verified," he said to her. "Then get me Murray Lawrence on the phone. That's all."

Murray was cheerful, loud, and boisterous on the phone, and threw out three invitations to lunch before Justin could tell him the reason for his call.

"Murray," he said finally, "I want you to do me something. How well do you know

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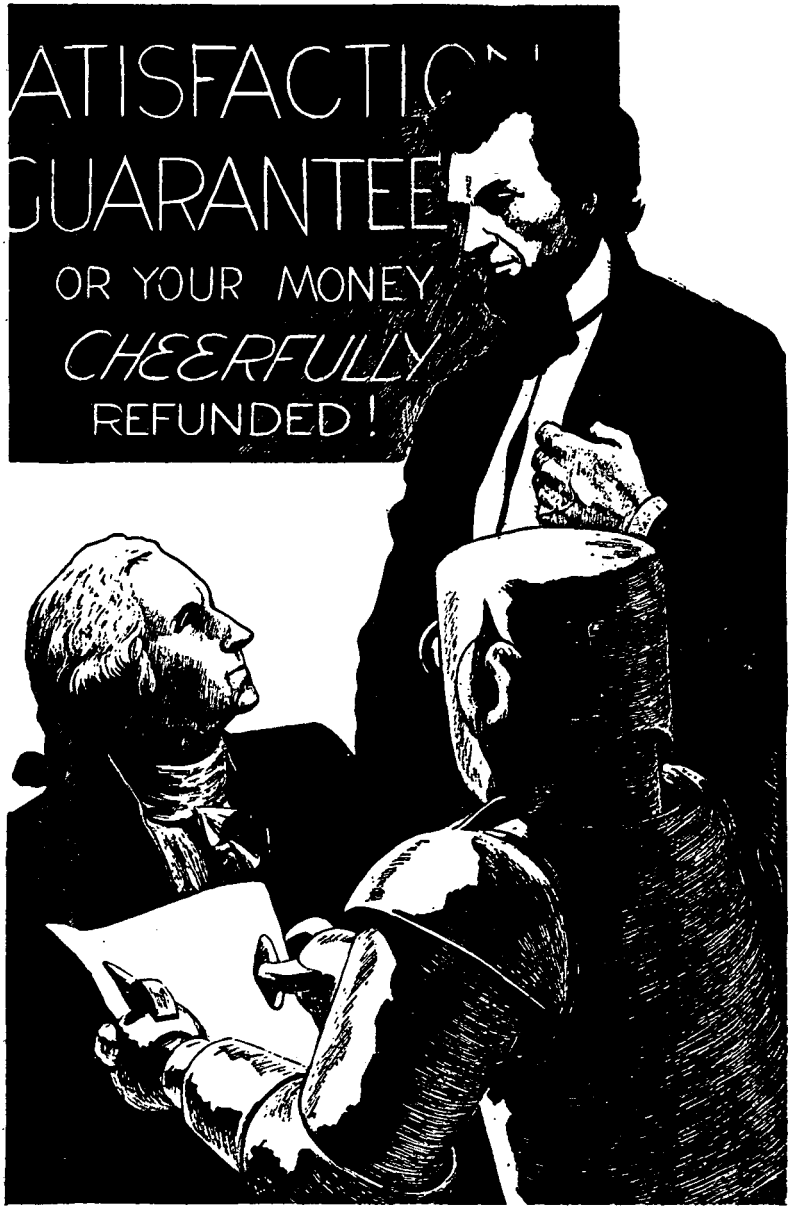

Were these robots an insult to the memories of great men?

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the Valeras'? . . . You do? Fine. Here's the thing—I want you to wrangle me an invitation to one of their parties . . . No, business. New client. I'll explain later . . . Yes, I'll dress formal. Anything for money. Okay, swell . . . See you tomorrow."

By this time, Justin's secretary had returned with the check, and of course, the signatures had been found to be genuine. The lawyer sat back comfortably, perhaps even smugly, in his green leather chair, and looked at the crisp yellow strip of paper with the crisp $10,000 written across its face. It was a large retainer, even for Justin Mark. His first five-figure fee had been for the defense of a college president (facing a paternity suit)—and now, for the prosecution of a prominent robot manufacturer, on the charges of libel.

"I don't know if I can make it stick," he told Murray at lunch the next day. I haven't made any sort of an investigation yet, of course, but from what the men from the Historical Society told me, it looks like a rocky couple of months for Mrs. Mark's brightest child."

Murray, talking between mouthfuls of steaming bouillon, said: "Depend on me, anyway. Got the invitation to the Valeras' next soiree. You'll get an eyeful of these libelous robots there."

"Have you seen them?"

"Sure. It's a sight, boy." Murray stopped eating, happy for the opportunity for a little dramatics. "You walk up the front steps. You ring the bell. The door opens—wham! The butler's Woodrow Wilson! You walk inside and step over to the bar. Wham—Abe Lincoln hands you a cocktail! The maid comes in to announce dinner. Wham! It's Carrie Nation!"

"Eat," said Justin. "I got all that from the Society. What I'm really interested in is how close the resemblance is, and what, if anything, I can do about it."

"How about suit from the descendants?" asked Murray, now returned to his meal.

"Several of the descendant families are in on the deal. They came to the Society first, and the AHS has agreed to pool the families' resources and their own. They've put the whole thing in my lap."

"But is it really *libel?*" asked the lawyer's friend.

"That's the question," said Justin glumly. "There's no precedent for this sort of thing. It would be different

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if these Handmaster Robots were made up in the likenesses of living people, but there's no such case I've ever heard about. I should have stuck to criminal law. When's that party?" he asked suddenly.

"Wednesday night. I've already told Valera that I was bringing you. He thinks it's a fine idea."

"Deeply grateful," said Justin soberly. "How's the soup?"

But Wednesday afternoon, Justin's plans for the evening changed quickly.

His secretary came in and informed the lawyer that Brigham Handmaster, president of the Handmaster Robot Corporation, and the object of Justin's intent study for the past week, had called personally and asked that Justin attend a small gathering at the Handmaster home.

When he had been left alone with the news, Justin fought down a naive but insistent feeling of awe—an awe inspired by fifteen years of legend. To the people who knew him only by that legend, Brigham Handmaster walked the earth with seven-league boots, was omnipotent, immortal, and spoke often and confidently to God. More had been written, spoken, and televised about Handmaster than any other figure of his time, and the Handmaster apocrypha could fill a five-foot shelf. It was whispered that the President of the United States, along with many other major world personalities, was a Handmaster robot; it was rumored that Handmaster had swung national elections by creating thousands of robots who voted at the polls the way Handmaster directed. There were many more tales of terror concerning him—most of them palpable fantasies—but each served to increase the stature, the fame, the notoriety of the robot manufacturer.

Handmaster, it was said, was curiously disinterested in these fables—even in the one which began . . . "Once upon a time, a robot was created named Brigham Handmaster . . ."

It was quite a colossus that had called Justin—personally—and invited him to tea. The awe was justifiable, but after this first reaction, Justin thought seriously about the call. He decided that there could be only one reason for the invitation: Handmaster knew about Justin and the Historical Society.

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"Return Mr. Handmaster's call," said the lawyer into the Soundbox. "Invitation accepted."

The robot that took Justin Mark's coat was an early, standard model, sweet-faced and placid. Like all Handmaster products, it was actually an android, a creation of synthetic tissue, but the public had never accepted the odd word and Handmaster's sales department had bowed to their preference for the term "robot." He introduced himself quietly as John, and led him through a majestic hallway to the main room of the Handmaster home.

It was a striking room, but Justin, prepared to be dazzled, was rather surprised to find it not so unlike the rooms he had seen in the homes of other wealthy men.

Justin counted seven people in the room, but he knew that Handmaster wouldn't be among them, that the manufacturer would wait until all his guests were assembled before making his entrance.

As he stepped through the doorway, Felix Huston, Handmaster's personal physician, came up to him and shook his hand.

"We are so glad you could come, Mr. Mark," said the doctor after the unnecessary introduction. "Mr. Handmaster will be here shortly. Come in and let me introduce you to some people."

The doctor was a friendly man, rosy-cheeked and white-haired, the pluperfect model of the Herr Doktor from his polished brogans to the soft tweeds and briar pipe. But Justin warmed to him, and felt more at ease. He led the lawyer to the center of the room, where two huge lounges faced each other. Three men stood between the couches, one sat besides two women, and he too arose as Justin approached.

"Mr. Maxwell," said the doctor as Justin began the round of handshaking. "Mr. Sewell, Mr. Richardson, and —Mr. Hoenig. And the ladies—"

Justin turned to the couch where the women sat.

"Mrs. Handmaster, Miss Angel Handmaster—Mr. Justin Mark, the eminent attorney."

Everyone smiled and nodded politely, and a robot came over with a martini on a tray, which Justin took. He took a seat on the lounge opposite the women, his face giving no hint of the appraisal he was making of the seven people about him. But

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the legal mind was at work, classifying:

Maxwell, Sewell, and Richardson were obviously business associates of the Handmaster Corporation; they looked prosperous, well-fed, and their low-toned conversation was salted with sales and production statistics. Hoenig was a small dormouse of a man, with beady eyes behind large lenses. Weak-eyed, with a tired stoop, Justin judged that he was possibly one of the Handmaster scientists.

About Angel Handmaster, the lawyer at least had some outside information, for much had been written about this charming young girl, Handmaster's daughter by adoption. She wasn't more than eighteen or nineteen; pretty, bright-eyed, and managing to look femininely shy despite her long years beneath the spotlight of Handmaster publicity.

But the legal mind ran into difficulty when it focused on Joanna Handmaster, the manufacturer's wife, and the neat little white index cards in Justin's brain came tumbling down like the Alice in Wonderland deck. And all the classification that Justin could make was:

". . . the most beautiful woman I've ever seen—beyond a doubt."

The conversation began in small talk, and showed no sign of shifting into higher gear. The doctor spoke mildly of the theatre; the three businessmen, after flirting with Justin's interest in sports, continued to talk among themselves; the little man sat quietly huddled in his seat, wrapped around his martini and his apologetic air.

The comments from Angel were brief and intelligent, but Mrs. Handmaster's only contributions to the talk were several brilliant smiles—and Justin felt well satisfied.

The robot John came in.

"Mr. Handmaster," he announced.

Everyone stood up, but Justin didn't wait for their signal. He was on his feet, bringing the empty glass with him. He stooped to put it down on a table, and was surprised to find that he was swaying dizzily.

He looked up again, and saw the tall familiar figure walking slowly towards them, taking measured strides that seemed to lengthen the room as he came closer. He was slim and athletically built, his leonine head was framed by a mass of white ringlets, his

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eyes were dark and deep-set, and his mouth was curved in a smile of sad amusement, and Justin—

—fainted.

When he opened his eyes, Justin saw Handmaster sitting on the edge of the bed where he lay stretched.

"I'm sure you'll be fine now," said Handmaster's rich baritone. "Dr. Huston, who knows a great deal more about such things than I do, said you might have been overcome by excitement. However, you seem a reasonably calm young man, and I would be satisfied with a diagnosis of an overheated room, and the overheating whiskey. Can you talk?"

"Yes," said Justin, in a small voice.

"I am glad you could come."

Justin's answer was a croaked: "Thank you."

"And in a way, I'm grateful to your susceptibility to —whiskey. I wanted to talk to you alone. That would have been impossible downstairs."

The room came into full focus now, and the lawyer could see that it was nothing less than the Handmaster bedroom, and that the exquisitely comfortable bed was Handmaster's own. Justin suddenly became conscious that his shoes were on the bed, and he swung his feet to the floor and sat up.

"You were surprised, of course, when I called you for this engagement. You were probably even a little flattered." Justin looked up sharply. "Please don't take offense," said Handmaster smoothly. "You are quite an important person, really. You didn't need my invitation as a guarantee of that. However—" and the smile disappeared like the sun behind a cloud, and the handsome face darkened, "however there is only one matter upon which you and I could find a common ground of interest. And that is the suit which you are preparing against me for the American Historical Society."

"How did you know?" said Justin, his voice still weak.

The smile returned. Handmaster re-seated himself in a chair across from the lawyer, his long body relaxing into it with unconscious majesty. "There's a saying," the robot manufacturer said, the smile a softly playing line, "that if a man in an attic reviles the name of Handmaster, in two minutes Handmaster will be raising the roof."

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"Omniscience?" answered Justin, trying to put a sneer into his voice.

"So the people would like to believe."

"*Like* to believe?"

"Of course. To believe that Handmaster was truly omniscient, truly omnipotent, and truly—" he looked upwards with mock reverence—"talked with God. But before we become amateur philosophers, Mr. Mark, let me end with this: the greatest word in the language of the people is Father. And in the beginning, that, too, was the word."

Handmaster stood up in an attitude of finality.

"Now, Mr. Mark, I shall ask you to discontinue the suit you are preparing against the Corporation as a personal favor. If you refuse, I will offer you a greater sum than that offered by the American Historical Society. If you still persist, I will offer you with all sincerity, a high position with my own legal staff, on whatever basis you desire."

"Choice of one please?" said Justin, with a pale attempt at humor.

"—And if you still refuse, I may even threaten your life."

With that, Handmaster turned and left the bedroom, and from that moment Justin was left in the hands of the sweet-faced robot, who returned his hat and coat and guided the lawyer to his waiting 'copter.

On the flight home, Justin detected an odd taste in his mouth, and wondered if there had been something else in his drink besides gin and vermouth.

"I want another favor from you, Murray," said Justin over the desk, "and it's going to cost you twenty-five thousand dollars."

Lawrence refused to be startled. "So?"

"That's the cost of the exclusive Handmaster Model H. That's the model your friend Valera made so famous."

"I don't understand lawyers," said Murray. "They all play the same game, but keep changing the rules. What kind of robot would you like? Maybe Blackstone? Let's have it."

"Maybe Terrence McKay."

"For the love of Helen! Justin, you're impossible! I thought I'd hear you out, but this tears it. Now why," he said, pushing a long finger into Justin's chest, "do you want a robot to look like a ham television actor?"

"Terrence McKay is the

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highest-paid TV star in America," said the lawyer.

"He's a lousy actor."

"He's the idol of millions."

"Damn it!" Lawrence stood up. "Unless I quit playing the part of Watson, I leave this show on the road. What the deuce are you talking about?"

"Sit down," said the lawyer, "and I'll explain. Whatever your opinion of his thespian ability, Terrence McKay is undoubtedly the most popular figure of the screen. There isn't a more familiar face in America. Agreed?" Murray nodded. "Then here's the point. I've built up a little brief against the Handmaster Corporation, but it's so puny that I'm sure it couldn't stand on its own two feet in a court of law. But it's something else again if I can produce a robot in court that's a spitting image of a living human being—especially the unmistakeable image of Terrence McKay. Then I get Mr. McKay to do the suing, and put a law on the books that says *no* manufacturer may produce *any* robot with *any* resemblance to *any* human being, living or dead. Get it?"

"A noble thought, but hopeless, Justin, hopeless. Even if you got Terrence McKay to sue Handmaster, where would you get the robot?"

The lawyer looked wise. "I'm handling McKay's second divorce. I had lunch with him the other day and told him about the robot. He was incensed, to say the least. He'll sue."

"But the robot doesn't exist!"

"That's where you come in," said Justin. "You're going to buy it from the Handmaster Corporation, but directly from an untrustworthy but influential underling named Albert Yoder. He'll see that a Terrence McKay robot is made and delivered to your office—five thousand dollars over ceiling price. And Murray—Mr. Yoder will want that extra five thousand in cash. I'm sure you understand."

In three weeks, two deliveries were made simultaneously from the Handmaster Robot Corporation.

One was made to the prominent realtor, Murray Lawrence, and was delivered in person by a slit-eyed, nervous little man with an unruly moustache. It was a robot, the exclusive Handmaster Model H, list price: $10,000. Lawrence wrote a personal check for that amount while

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Albert Yoder stood by his chair, anxiously wiping his hands on his trousers. Murray blew on his signature, withdrew a fat envelope from a drawer, and handed both to the waiting man. Then he turned to look, with a wonderment and awe he never quite recovered from, at what seemed to be the famous television star, Terrence McKay, but was actually an unthinking, unfeeling machine of manufactured flesh, bone, and brain.

The second delivery was a letter, on the personal stationery of Brigham Handmaster, and it was addressed to Justin Mark, counselor-at-law. It read:

"Will you discontinue the suit which you are preparing against the Handmaster Robot Corporation, as a personal favor to yours,

Brigham Handmaster."

Terrence McKay threw a towel on his dressing table and whirled to face Justin in a much too dramatic gesture.

"There are some things you don't know," the actor said coldly. "One is the fact that the Handmaster family are dear personal friends of mine."

Justin could see his own face in the mirror, and was able to watch it register dismay. What a fool I am, he thought bitterly. I might have known that.

"Secondly, I don't believe that a word you're saying is true. I don't think there is any such robot, and if there is, the resemblance is only slight and accidental."

"Very well, then," said the lawyer, trying to rally his forces after this unexpected attack. "Suppose I put it this way. If there were such a robot, and it was a dead-ringer for you, and it was made with the express intention of duplicating your own body—would you sue?"

The actor stepped to the television monitor set into the right wall of his dressing room, flipped a switch, and watched a re-run of a scene from the newest McKay production. He smiled affectionately at the screen, enjoying the close-ups. Satisfied, he shut off the set, came back to his dressing table and started to remove his robe.

"I should be very dismayed if such a robot existed," he said. "But I really can't believe it."

"Okay," said Justin, lifting his hat from the table. "We'll see about it later."

In the doorway, he turned

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once more to McKay. "By the way," he said lightly, "I understand your robot does the laundry."

There were several messages on Justin's desk when he returned, three of them from Lawrence. And dropped casually on the blotter was another letter from the office of the Handmaster Corporation.

He picked up Murray's messages first. They were all pleas for a return phone call. He asked his secretary to get the number, and soon the phonescreen glowed yellow. But it was Terrence McKay on the image.

"What the hell?" said Justin.

Then Murray appeared. "It's your damned robot," he explained. "I want to talk to you about it, Justin. I've been threatened."

"You what?"

"Well, not out in the open. A Handmaster representative called me yesterday and offered to buy him—I mean it—back. Claimed that there was an error in manufacture, and that the robot wasn't 'serviceable.' They found out, Justin," he concluded nervously.

"I expected they might find out. Yoder's out of work."

"That 'serviceable' business," said his friend, and Justin could see that he was sweating. "That could be a threat in disguise, Justin."

The lawyer bit his lip, then remembered not to look worried. "All right. I'll draw up a notice of purchase this afternoon. I'm buying your Terrence McKay robot from you. I'll call for my property this afternoon."

Murray looked relieved, and with a brave attempt at humor put his arm around the robot. "How much of a mark-up?" he cracked. But he was still sweating.

The letter read:

"I offer you my personal check for twenty-five thousand dollars, if you will discontinue the suit you are now preparing against yours,
Brigham Handmaster."

The doorman was a cinch, but the real test of whether Justin could get away with the experiment was the desk clerk. He was a lanky, sleepy-looking man, but with a lot of questions behind his heavy-lidded eyes. As Justin and the robot approached the desk, he said:

"Mr. McKay! But I thought—"

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Justin interrupted hurriedly. "I'm Franklin, Mr. McKay's doctor. He had a bad attack of laryngitis at the studio, so I brought him home."

Corny, thought Justin, but the only way. Alfred Yoder hadn't bothered to duplicate McKay's famous voice in the Model H.

"I see," said the clerk solicitously. "Do you need any help?"

The lawyer smiled. "I'm afraid I do. Mr. McKay forgot his keys when he left the studio."

"Well . . ." the clerk looked at the robot uncertainly. "I guess it's all right. I have a passkey." He reached beneath the desk for it, and came out to join them. "Follow me, please."

Upstairs, the clerk let them into the McKay apartment, fussed around a bit, deprecated Justin's offer of a dollar tip, and left.

When he had gone, Justin seated the robot on a plush hallway sofa and gave it instructions.

"Now get this straight, Terrence. When your counterpart comes through that door, I want you to say: 'How do you do? I'm Terrence McKay.' If that doesn't startle him—" Justin stopped, realizing that he might as well confide in the bookcase.

He left the robot sitting motionless in the hall, and went into the kitchen. There was a turkey sandwich in the cold unit, and he ate it with great enjoyment, downing a tin of beer. Then Justin came back and looked for a suitable hiding place for the moment when the real Terrence McKay would come through the door. What a mystery I'm making of this, he thought to himself. Murray was right. Trouble with me is, I think I'm Sherlock Holmes.

He went to the robot and straightened its pocket handkerchief. He was about to adjust its polka-dotted bow tie when he heard the click of a turning latch.

Justin looked around wildly. Damn! he thought. With a bound, he headed for the hallway closet. Luckily, it was spacious, and not jammed with damp overcoats. The door was thin enough to permit sounds to come through clearly. And the first sound that Justin heard was a light footstep, then the closing of a door, and then—a woman's voice.

"You told me you were going out of town," the voice

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said. It was a young, sweet voice, but its tone was harsh and accusing.

"Don't think I came to spy on you, because I didn't," she said. "I came to get something. My compact. I left it here Friday."

There was a silence.

Then—

"Oh, Terry!" The voice rose to a higher pitch. "Why must you act this way? Don't you see what you're doing to us—to all of us? If you only knew! *Don't just stare at me!"* Her voice dropped to a low tone, but it still skirted the edges of hysteria. "I know I'm making a fool of myself. But I don't care, do you see? I just don't!" She gasped. "I can't stand this anymore!"

Then she was pleading—

"It's the only thing you can do. Terry, darling, you must see that. Leave her alone. She's no good for you. Maybe I'm not good for you either, but leave *her* alone!"

Then the voice cracked, and the sobs came.

"This could mean the end of everything, Terry—everything! Terry! Don't just stare! TERRY!"

After that, the silence was like a heavy weight, pressing against the closet door. Justin's breathing became heavy, and hearing it, the lawyer held his breath and listened again.

There were two explosions!

Stunned, Justin fumbled clumsily with the doorknob, finally wrenched his way out of the closet. The door to the apartment was opened wide. He ran through it, out into the lobby, but it was empty, the elevator already descending.

The lawyer walked slowly back into the room. Seated rigidly on the sofa, its manufactured flesh and bone shattered beyond recognition by the blast of a pistol, was the robot.

As Justin came through the doorway, a flat voice from somewhere beyond the pulpy mass said:

"How do you do? I'm Terrence McKay."

Justin rounded the corner and entered a drug store. He went into the visiphone booth and dialed Murray's number. His friend appeared on the screen, a napkin tied ludicrously around his neck. In spite of himself, Justin laughed.

"What is it?" said Murray.

"Another favor," said Justin. "Go to 12 Terrace Row, Apartment 18-B. You'll find your—I mean *my* robot

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there. It's shot to hell, so you can have it at half price."

"What happened?"

"Figure it out for yourself when you get there. Murray—"

"What?"

"I'm not joking about this. Be sure to get there this afternoon and get rid of the robot. Now get off the phone so I can call my office."

"Miss Lyons," Justin said when the sharp features of his secretary appeared on the screen, "I won't be into the office at all this afternoon. Send any important calls to my apartment."

"There was one message, Mr. Mark. From Mr. Handmaster."

Justin rolled his tongue back. "A letter?" he asked carefully.

"No, sir. It was a telephone message. Mr. Handmaster asked if you could come over to his home. As soon as possible. He said it was urgent, Mr. Mark.

It was the same robot butler who came to the door as Justin entered the Handmaster home for the second time.

"Please come in, Mr. Mark," he said. "My master is expecting you."

Justin walked past him, but turned when he saw that the robot was not following at his heels. Instead, it stood stiffly in the doorway, still smiling at nothing, and Justin was alarmed to hear him say:

"Please come in, Mr. Mark. Please come in, Mr. Mark. Please come in Mr. Mark."

Then the robot shut the door, turned and met Justin's eyes, broadened its smile and began to follow him. Justin was unnerved by this uncharacteristic performance, but managed to collect himself. He walked into the main room, and this time it was Handmaster who arose unsteadily to greet him. There was no formality.

"I'm very glad you could come," he said. "It's very important to me." His voice and manner were calm. Again, Justin felt the presence of the robot near his back. He turned, shocked, for the robot had placed one hand on Justin's arm.

"Please come in, Mr. Mark," said the robot again, repeating the speech in the same gentle voice. "Please come in, Mr. Mark."

The robot's grip tightened on Justin's arm, and the lawyer realized that he would have to battle the robot for his release. "Mr. Handmaster," he said, trying to keep

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his voice level, "there's something wrong. He—"

"*John!*" Handmaster yelled at his butler. Instantly, Justin's arm was freed. The robot stood stiffly at attention. The manufacturer went up to it, peering into the placid eyes.

Justin felt his scalp prickle as he looked on, for great, oily tears seemed to be coming from the soft blue eyes of the robot, running down the smooth-planed cheeks and over the smiling lips.

"Good Lord!" said the lawyer. "Can robots *cry?* Do they have feelings?"

"In a way," said Handmaster sadly. He put his hands on the robot's shoulders, and looked at him with an emotion that might have been affection.

"John is one of our early models," the manufacturer said. "The early Series had a tendency towards—mental imbalance. But John has always been—all right." He put his hand on the robot's neck. "Have you ever seen a robot turned off, Mr. Mark?"

"How do you mean?"

"Not killed, you know," Handmaster said softly. "Turned off. Stopped. For good, unless the Factory sees fit to reactivate it. But even then, they're not the same. Just—spare parts."

His hand moved up the neck of the robot.

"There's a button here, a flesh-colored button, just behind the right ear. You'd hardly know it was there. It's well concealed."

Justin said: "Are you going to—"

The manufacturer dropped his arms. "No. Not now. We'll see about that some other time. John has been with me for many years. He gives me the feeling of a loyal and devoted servant, a faithful servant. I enjoy that feeling Mr. Mark."

He sent the robot out of the room with a word. John went silently, but in another minute he was back, bringing Angel Handmaster into the room.

"Come in my dear," he said to her. "Mr. Mark is here."

The girl came towards us, walking in a trance-like state.

"You remember Mr. Mark, don't you?"

Angel looked vacantly at Justin.

"He's going to help us. Aren't you Mr. Mark?" Handmaster's strong gaze was compelling.

Justin stared back. "Of course. If this is something

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I can help you with. But I'm afraid it's not too clear."

"You've handled problems of this sort before," Handmaster continued, "before you took divorce cases and so forth. Handle this problem for me, Mr. Mark, and you can consider your libel suit settled without court action. This is more important to me."

The manufacturer took his daughter gently by the shoulders and eased her into a chair by the cold fireplace. Her eyes were still expressionless, even when her father said: "Tell Mr. Mark what you've done, Angel."

Angel looked at the floor.

"I've killed someone," she said.

Her voice was dull and unexcited, but Justin recognized it now, and knew what was coming.

"I've killed Terrence McKay," she went on. "In his apartment, this morning."

"Why?" said Justin tightly.

"I was in love with him. And he was—unfaithful."

Justin looked up as he heard the angry noise Handmaster suddenly made in his throat. "A lack of fidelity seems to be a Handmaster family problem, Mr. Mark," he said bitterly. "I'm sure you know about my first wife. The Sunday horror-gravure has told her story often enough."

Justin searched his mind hurriedly for that twelve-year-old story, but all he could recall was something about the first Mrs. Handmaster's lover, whose flourishing business had been wrecked by Handmaster's clever and ruthless tactics following the divorce. The lover had shot himself. A messy business.

"I made my first wife a Jonah for every man she met after her betrayal," said Handmaster. "In my younger days, revenge was my favorite pastime, Mr. Mark." The manufacturer lit a lean cigar.

Angel began to cry, but instead of comforting her, Handmaster went to a cabinet and opened a drawer. He returned with a pistol in his hand. "This is the gun my daughter used," he said to Justin. "It's a family heirloom, you might say." He handed it to Justin, who took it gingerly. "It's killed more than one thoughtless lover," said Handmaster, and Justin knew it was the weapon that had brought death to his first wife's luckless *amour*.

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"Will you handle this problem for me, Mr. Mark?"

Justin cleared his throat. "Well, I think there's something I ought to tell you first—"

Handmaster stopped him. "Before you do, I want you to know that the situation is far from hopeless. I can provide you quite a suitable scapegoat, if necessary. When Angel returned home with her unhappy tidings, I sent some competent employees to the McKay apartment, and they did not return alone."

"What do you mean?"

"They discovered a man in the act of removing the body. They have brought him here, so that we may ascertain his purpose, and whether he might have suitable motive for committing the crime. Or perhaps, to see if we could *provide* that motive."

Justin shot to his feet. "What man?" he said.

"His name is Lawrence, and he has something to do with real estate. I thought I would get your expert legal opinion before we made our next move."

"My expert legal opinion is for you to release him right away," said Justin angrily. "He had nothing to do with it. And as for your daughter, she can thank her good fairy that I beat her to Terrence McKay's apartment this morning!"

Handmaster was obviously shaken by his words, and his nervous fingers let the long ash of his cigar drop to the rug. "What are you saying?"

"Your daughter destroyed twenty-five thousand dollars worth of robot, Mr. Handmaster. So far, that's her only crime."

Angel's tears stopped, and she sat up stiffly, her face a pretty picture of surprise.

"So you can let Murray Lawrence go right now," Justin continued, "and you can stop worrying about Terrence McKay. He's in sickening good health. And since there's no murder case, I guess we're back to our old standing on the libel suit. As a matter of fact," he finished wryly, "you can thank your daughter's impetuousity for helping you win it. She's ruined the best piece of evidence I had."

The lawyer started for the doorway, embittered at the turn of events, but somehow relieved to have seen Handmaster humbled before him.

On his way out, he almost collided with the incredibly beautiful woman who was Handmaster's wife. But her

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classic features were strangely distorted, her creamy complexion mottled by the crimson of uncontrolled anger. She swept past Justin, and to his amazement, threw herself in a rage at her adopted daughter.

"You fiend! You filthy, rotten tramp!" she screamed.

Her long red fingernails clawed at the young girl, who cried out in horror. Handmaster stumbled backwards in bewilderment.

Justin rushed back into the room and tried to separate the two women, but the strength of Mrs. Handmaster was doubled by the vigor or her anger. By now, her fingers had encircled Angel's throat, and Justin found himself helpless to stop them from throttling the life from the young girl's body.

"Handmaster!" he shouted. "Help me! She's killing her!"

The robot manufacturer stood frozen. Then, with a great effort, he leaped to Justin's side. They managed to pry the fingers from the slim white throat, but not to hold the frenzied woman. She tore from their grasp, and reached out for the gun that Justin had returned to the table near Angel's chair.

"Joanna!" Handmaster's crackling cry was terrifying. Justin grabbed for her arm, but he was too late. She fired, wildly, shattering a precious voice atop the mantelpiece. Angel shrieked, and made a break for the doorway.

"You killed him!" Joanna Handmaster screamed after her. "You killed the only man I've ever loved!"

She fired after the girl before Justin could reach her again, but her aim was poor. Angel fell sobbing to the floor, but she was unhurt.

"Joanna, please!" Handmaster pleaded. His wife whirled to face him, the gun still a deadly power in her hand. "You can't do this—you don't understand—"

Justin saw the strange new light that entered the woman's eyes as she faced her husband. But he didn't quite understand its significance until she said:

"My lord and master!"

She laughed, harshly.

Handmaster took a hesitant step forward, as if to meet the bullet she fired at his chest.

Handmaster's fall was slow and awkward.

He lifted one arm as he went down, and clutched at the table, overturning it.

"Fidelity," he said, as Jus-

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tin stooped to help him, "was always . . . a family problem."

Justin looked up from the blood-stained shirtfront. Handmaster's wife had put down the gun, and had sat heavily in the chair before the fireplace. Her body had gone limp and lifeless, the angry fire banked and dying.

"Angel!" snapped Justin. "Call an ambulance. Right now!"

He turned to the robot manufacturer again. The light was dimming in his eyes, but labored breaths still came from his mouth. He was trying to say something, but the words were unformed, muted.

"What is it?" said Justin, bending closer.

The speech came out in a harsh whisper.

"Turn her off," Handmaster was saying.

"What?" Justin put his ear to the moving lips.

"Turn her off!"

Handmaster raised his arm in a supreme effort, and pointed to the back of his right ear. It was the last thing he did. **THE END**

"They said if we stood here long enough we'd meet a friend."

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This is the second John Hagan story to appear in our pages; one of the most haunting, most cleverly plotted fantasies we've read in a long, long time. You'll be seeing more of this writer here and in other mags. And you may well remember him for a long time as the chap who wrote——

THE THING BENEATH THE BAY

By JOHN HAGAN

ILLUSTRATOR NOVICK

The monotonous pounding was directly above his head this time, a heavy pounding that really woke him. There had been other poundings in the last forty years, but never so close as this. Often he had been disturbed by earth movements in the centuries past and dreamed his great dreams as a result, but there was little chance of escape through any earthquake. Those who placed him in this vault knew exactly what chance he had of escape through natural causes and planned to keep him safe till the vault became in truth a grave.

But now it seemed as if there was a chance. Creatures of some species were active above his resting place and a check of his remaining energy showed enough left to try for a loosening of the barrier that held him. If he could once reach a position where he could absorb solar energy again, then the power he craved could be his. Gropingly, carefully, the dark thing in the vault sought out a mind among those above. A mind that would contain his long enough for his glib tongue to win him freedom from doom.

And, as he sought, far away another intelligence stirred to resume its age old duty of guardianship.

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He sensed her agony—tried to help her.

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JOHN STANTON built his California home on the ocean side of the coastal highway expressly to please his wife, Leda, and her fanciful desire to be alone by the sea. No one else built on their side and even Stanton enjoyed the feeling of being shut off with nothing but the eternal sound of the surf and the high piping of the gulls when mist shut down over the area evenings in a manner that gave the place its name: Playa Niebla—in English, Misty Shore.

When the Stantons felt the urge to be further removed from man and his works, they could walk out on a narrow path to Rocky Point. A thousand feet out from the shoreline where only an automatic beacon flashed warning of the watery death waiting for those small boat skippers failing to keep clear of the reef that projected into the sea. From the south, the breakers crashed against Rocky Point and its reef like rolling thunder, then ebbed with a sibilant hissing that made those of the uninitiated shiver and seek the warmth of human companionship inshore. Since the very beginnings of time, John Stanton believed, that surf must have been smashing at the reef, and still it stood like a finger of cold Fate to trap the unwary and drag them down to roll their bones along the ocean floor as playthings for the grisly scavengers of the deep. There was a savagery about that surf, as if it thirsted for the lives of the careless. And it had slaked itself too often for comfort. Not only in slamming small boats on the waiting rocky teeth, but in sweeping occasional fishermen off the reef when they forgot to watch the deadly incoming tide. Warning signs told of the danger but dawn still found hopeful sportsmen casting in the surf, heedless of peril.

The lee of the surf, northward, was calm and still by contrast. The presence of a second projection of land formed a channel called the Marina Inlet and drained the swampy salt marsh beyond the highway bridge.

Stanton seldom fished but his wife, Leda, seemed driven by some inner compulsion to walk out on that lonely path nights when the tide was low, and her uneasy husband never permitted her to go alone. He knew that a single misstep on that path and the frail figure of his beloved wife could vanish forever in the tossing waters. Yet she

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would insist on going out to the very point and stand there till she was utterly exhausted before he could take her unresisting arm and lead her home to troubled sleep. Yet if he prevailed upon Leda to stay home, she would toss restlessly for hours and look white about the lips next morning.

Once, as a jest, he tried to tease Leda about seeking a lover from the sea and she turned on him with a fury unusual to her nature as she denied it. Instead, on a night when the fog lay thick and the surf was subdued to almost a murmur, Leda touched his arm and spoke, as if explaining:

"Somewhere out there I sense an evil. A terrible evil, a thing that could sweep away all we love. It waits, as it has waited for ages, waits for its moment of release. I know it is there, but I do not know what it can be, nor why it draws me here to sense it. I feel that something is crouched in a cage of horror and yearns for release. I sense it, buried out there." Her breath released suddenly. "Take me home, John, I think I woke it." She yielded quietly to his guiding hand as they paced inshore, then stopped near the house and spoke again. "No, it but stirred in its sleep. I think it had a dream of me, nothing more."

Stanton, aware that Leda was deeply disturbed, let the weird, inexplicable statement pass without question. Long ago, Leda had suffered through the horrors of war as a child and refused to marry him unless he understood she would be moody at times. And she was, on occasion, almost irrational. But he loved her deeply, and tried to understand. Leda was born in Britain and spent more nights in London bomb shelters than in her own bed while the Blitz was at its height. As an Air Corps officer serving in England, Stanton had come to know Leda and her family, finally marrying the girl when she grew to womanhood. Marrying her not out of sympathy for her frail body, but truly loving the ethereal quality Leda possessed.

Leda would never be too healthy, despite the warmth of the California home and Stanton ruled out the fragile body bearing a child. The end result was complete dependence upon each other till they were half-withdrawn from the world. He had no

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resentment of the limitation and hastened home each night of the four years of marriage, knowing Leda would be standing on the steps of their home waiting for him. Even that night of his accident on the Freeway, she was out there, her face agonized at danger to him. Leda knew, even before he told her the details, that he had come close to death when the car of a drunk jumped the guard rail on the Freeway and caromed off his own vehicle. Her arms held him all that night.

Stanton, a nuclear engineer, accepted his wife for what she was and never criticized. If Leda was psychic, she was sensitive and must be shielded from all harm. This was his code and they lived happily in his observance of it.

After the night Leda spoke of the hidden evil, she kept away from the rocky spit for weeks. Some deep inner emotion had been stirred and her affection for her husband increased, if it was possible that complete devotion could increase. Instead of discussing her words, they laughed and played on the beach in the warm daylight, noticing as they did that a barge had taken up a position about a thousand feet beyond the spit and was driving piles there into the ocean floor.

Stanton inquired about the barge and found out that a long-projected plan for a small-boat harbor was starting. The harbor itself was to be built beyond the ocean front highway and would not affect their home, but an additional seawall would extend their rocky spit out into the ocean to guard the incoming craft against adverse wind and the heavy tides.

Gradually they became used to the heavy thump-thump of the distant pile-driver as it worked night and day to push the project to completion. Yet some rocky strata from the work spot ran under their home and the building often vibrated in sympathy with the pounding till Leda would put a hand to her head in exasperation. But they endured, knowing it would be finished soon.

Then the pounding became irregular and a queer rumor began to run about in the neighborhood. The contractor was having trouble keeping men on the barge to run the pile-driver. A stream of construction veterans from desert and jungle came eagerly to work at the gradually increasing wages and then van-

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ished after a day or two with vague excuses. There was no reason they could, or would, tell. The men just wanted to get away from the area, and some were so eager to go that they left the money they had earned. One man even swam ashore late on an afternoon when Stanton and Leda were out on the rocky spit. Stanton helped the exhausted swimmer from the water and brought him to their home for a warming drink. The swimmer was shame-facedly defiant, but determined. In response to his host's curious questions, he finally burst out:

"There's a something out there, bud. I dunno what, but it gets to whispering to you and drives you nuts. All last night it was at me, and I could feel it like little fingers pulling inside my head. We played the radio so loud you coulda heard it from here and that helped a little. It was sort of a begging thing. It wanted help, but I dunno. I got the feeling it was a lousy, slimy thing. Not my kind." He shivered. "So when my boss said I was to work the night shift again tonight, I resigned, sort of. Thanks for the drink, fella. I'm going to shove off."

The man refused to say more and departed, leaving them to stare at each other till Leda finally murmured:

"I knew it, John, I felt it weeks ago. There is something out there that wants help. What is it, darling?"

Stanton shook his head, uneasily. Leda, sensitive mentality that she was, had felt the nameless thing first, and now tough, hard-bitten construction men were running away from it. He spoke vaguely of self-hypnotism and mass-hallucination, knowing he was fooling neither himself nor Leda. Trying to assume a practical turn of mind, he determined to see if there was any radiation from that distant source, but the instruments he brought home only indicated a slight increase when he went out on the farthest point of the spit. Whatever was causing the disturbance was further out at sea.

Then the desperate contractor changed the aspect of things by laying a road along the spit and backing truck loads of huge rocks out to extend the point. Stanton assented, since that meant the end of pile-driving and he secretly hoped the rocks would bury the hostilely vibrating entity even more

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deeply than had originally been the case.

Slowly the seawall extended out to where the tenantless barge was anchored with no more than a quarter of its work complete. The barge was removed and still loads by the hundred chugged past the Stanton home with the drivers in no hurry to reach their destination, yet almost speeding inland once they had discharged their burdens. Winter storms delayed the work but the contractor had a penalty clause in his agreement and began to run night shifts and finally work his equipment all twenty-four hours till the Stanton home was beset continually by the rumbling trucks backing out to extend the seawall.

Unable to rest properly, Stanton complained to the contractor, and that gentleman, willing enough, offered to bear the expense of the family living elsewhere till the work was done. Stanton agreed and then the plan was overthrown by the firm refusal of Leda to leave her home. She might be worried about the menace out at sea, but she was determined to stay till the mystery was resolved.

By mid-spring, the seawall was virtually complete and both the Stantons walked out to the end of it, curious to see the changes the new barrier had caused. Since it was early in the afternoon, none of the ghostliness of their night trips was evident. The working men had destroyed the illusion of menace by their efforts; the actual appearance of the seawall.

They were alone on the seawall, they found, and the loneliness of the original rocky spit was accentuated by distance. Out here, two thousand feet from the shore, not even a shout could reach them and the bright sunlight seemed to hold no warmth of human companionship. Only the surf rolled against the barrier with a thunderous smashing sound, and then retreated in white confusion as if it was baffled by the added wall.

Almost at once, Stanton noticed a peculiarity out on the jetty. Where formerly gulls had wheeled piping in the endless hunt for food, there was not one visible. Not a bird, not a leaping fish, nothing. Of all visible life, they were the only representatives and Leda grasped her husband's arm with real terror in her eyes:

"Darling, it is still here.

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Right below us, I think. I can feel it plainly."

"Let's get off this thing." Stanton knew what she meant. His own mind felt a vague stirring in it. "I think this spot is dangerous somehow." He was further alarmed by the pallor of his wife's face, and the eerieness of the atmosphere. As the construction man had said, it felt like little fingers plucking at his mind. Then suddenly it was gone and he turned to mop his brow and laugh about it to his wife.

One glance and he froze. Leda's pretty face was distorted almost out of human semblance. Her lips were drawn back in a snarl and her eyes were closed tightly. She had the look of one who is fighting a bitter inner struggle. Then it ceased and she spoke, but with little trace of her own soft voice:

"At last I find what I needed. Creature, what are you?"

If Leda had picked up a rock and flung it at his head, Stanton could not have been more shocked. He stammered:

"D-Darling, what is it. Are you ill?" His racing mind wondered if the mental breakdown, predicted long ago by that doctor in England, had occurred. Cautiously, he moved to a position on the edge of the jetty. If Leda had some sort of paroxysm, he intended to keep her from self-destruction.

But she stood stiffly, closed eyes glaring at him, while her somehow chilling voice resumed:

"I understand. You are the mate of this creature whose mind I am using. Thus you are concerned." Leda's voice held a note of cruel laughter that was never her own. "Well, perhaps we can make an arrangement satisfactory to me and I will release her unharmed. Otherwise, and this is all the warning I will give you, I will destroy her mind." Something utterly cold and ruthless in the words made Stanton shake.

"Thanks." He spoke dryly, knowing he was treading on some perilous ground himself. "Suppose you tell me who or what you are, and we can talk about your deal."

"I?" The voice held a trace of majesty. "I am Atan." A distinct pause followed, and then the voice went on, as if baffled. "Surely you know of Atan, creature."

"Never heard of you, Atan." Stanton spoke truthfully.

"What manner of thing are

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you that you know not the child of the Shining Ones?" There was wonder in Atan's voice. "I am he who was created by the Ethne as the triumph of their science." A pause, and then again. "Creature, describe your physical being."

Stanton's mind raced madly. If he let this Atan overwhelm him, Leda might be lost forever. A stray thought came that he might defy Atan and be none the worse for it:

"So you are the triumph of a science and cannot see me for yourself. Frankly, Atan, I think you are a bluffer of some kind. You may be able to destroy my wife's mind, and for that reason I will talk with you, but suppose you start telling me the truth. Or shall I tell you I deduce you are a prisoner physically confined below me and need my help to obtain freedom?"

Leda's body shook with what Stanton knew was fury and then the voice came far less imperiously:

"I know you are not of the Ethne, for I feel no kinship in you. Yet you have a reasoning mind. By what name do I call you?"

"I am Stanton, Atan. If you wish my proper background to help you, tell me how long you have been confined."

"Long and long, and long again." The words held a weariness in them. "Let me check my remaining energy." There was a silence and later an almost muffled cry from Leda's lips. "Stanton, I must calculate carefully, for my store of energy is greatly dissipated. Yet do not think I am weak." There was a touch of menace in the words and Stanton smiled, grimly, as he lit his pipe. Atan sniffed with Leda's nostrils and regained a bit of arrogance. "So you offer me worship. In that, at least, you show intelligence."

"Just smoking my pipe. Atan." Stanton spoke calmly. "My race uses the habit in moments of relaxation, not as worship. Now suppose you stop your bluffing. I know about energies. The use of them is my profession. How long have you been in your confinement?"

"In your terms." The voice sounded sick. "More than one hundred thousand years."

Stanton seated himself on a rock, wondering if this grisly creation of some far-forgotten science could tell the truth. Yet he knew that the half-life of radioactive matter could be measured only in thousands of years and Atan

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claimed to be the masterpiece of a lost race. He was roused by the voice:

"Will you now describe yourself and your surroundings?"

Stanton gave the configuration of a human body and met a wondering answer:

"The apes of the tree country." Atan was shaken. "In my time, you were as dirt. And you claim now to be the superior race of this planet, I can sense from your expressions. Have you no knowledge of the Ethne?"

"Never heard of them, Atan." Stanton was almost cheerful. From black despair at the probable destruction of Leda's mind, he had come around to grappling with the problem of destroying Atan instead, and drew strength from the idea, he felt.

"No, you would not." Atan spoke slowly. "Their world was not yours. If this creature, no, this mate of yours would only open her mind to me, I could deduce much about you that is not clear. Command her to open her mind or I will destroy her."

"I doubt that, Atan." Stanton was calm. "Without her, you would be helpless again. I know you tried to enter my mind and failed. That was true also of the construction men last fall. I think you had better quit trying to impress me, and act like the helpless prisoner you are. If you want one thing from me, you had better learn manners. I can pick my wife up in my arms and carry her home. Then the distance will prohibit you using energy to control her. I think you are using a lot just holding her here. How far down are you?"

"Five thousand feet or more from this mate of yours, Stanton. You are a stubborn opponent, and I will remember that in the time to come. Yet I can keep a finger of energy in her mind to wreck it if you do carry her away. Stanton, I yearn for the light of the sun. With it, I can be the real Atan of ancient days, a creature of light. I beg of you, ask your mate to open her eyes and give me one glimpse of the sun."

So Leda was fighting him. That was why her eyes were closed so tightly. Stanton saw her hand make a negative gesture and replied:

"Sorry, Atan, this is the dark time of day. Surely you recall a night and day cycle, do you not?"

"I recall." Atan spoke with infinite grief in his tones. "I am tortured by the memory,

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Stanton. Long ago I lost track of night and day. The hammering of your fellow-creatures did not aid me to distinguish, since they continued full cycles. So I must accept what you say as truth. Yet I yearn for the sun. It was truly my mother and the Ethne only fashioned me by tapping its energy. Afterward, I became their ruler, the light of their abode. Till we no longer agreed." Atan hesitated. "Stanton, would you like to rule this race of yours?"

"No." The engineer was blunt. "I have all I need in this world. Besides, I think you are bluffing again. What have you to offer? You, an entity that was imprisoned by his creators for trying to make slaves of them."

"A lie." Atan raged. "I but tried to lead the Ethne to greater heights and they would not see the greatness. I am indestructible and no weapon your kind could conceive could ever destroy me. Do you realize what that implies?"

"A supreme egotist." Stanton played carefully. "Atan, I think I do know your name, faintly. It has been corrupted to Satan in tribal memory and come down to us as a symbol of all the evil that ever was. How could I possibly be sure of you keeping faith with me if I did aid you?"

The very flesh of Leda seemed to strain, as if the spirit of Atan was attempting to burst through into the sunlight and destroy his tormentor. Then the fit passed and the voice became ingratiating again:

"Stanton, truly you misjudge me. The Ethne, a race so far beyond you in progress that they would regard you as an ape, did prison me here till I repented my ways. To prove that repentance, I have no choice but to convince you. So I will withdraw from your mate's mind on condition that you promise to return here a day-night cycle from now and speak with me again. Will you do this?"

"This indicates my wife must also come." Stanton mused.

"Naturally." Atan betrayed anxiety, and Stanton nodded:

"Very well, but I warn you, Atan, if you attempt to wreck my wife's mind, I will find means to injure you. Let her go."

Leda fell limply and Stanton sprang to catch her, wondering if he had been right. In

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a moment a sardonic laugh accompanied the withdrawal of Atan.

Hurriedly, the anxious Stanton carried his unconscious wife to their home, then gave her a stimulant and kept watch till her eyelids fluttered. Leda murmured:

"Darling, stay with me in case he comes back."

"We're at home, dearest, relax a bit and we can talk afterward."

"No." Leda had a look of desperation in her eyes. "Atan is the ultimate evil of our race, and his own, too. The Ethne he spoke of were serpentine-like creatures. I could see that as he sat in my mind. He was draining energy from me, too. To replace part of what he was using. I even caught a glimpse of Atan as he visualizes himself. It was dazzling."

Her eyes closed for minutes while Stanton sat thinking of what she said. If Atan could drain energy from the minds of men, he might work on a progressive basis and win freedom yet. The sun shining in the windows had a coldness about it and soon night would fall. A night that would bring terror and death to many if Atan were able to gain power. He wondered if any action could possibly be taken to prevent the monster gaining his end, and Leda's eyes opened to answer him:

"Coax him to use energy. He has only a very little left and must conserve it. If he gets loose and makes actual contact with the rays of the sun, he will regain all his power and our world would be his plaything." Her arms came out. "I think you had better hold me tight for a while. No one must go near that place till Atan is exhausted. Only you and I. Atan plans to become ruler-divinity of the world. I knew that when he became angry at you and forgot to hide his thoughts from me. A radiant shape of twisting coils yet somehow so evil our minds can hardly recognize what he is. The only real truth he spoke was when he said we could not destroy him. No means in our world could do that. The Ethne were unable to obliterate him and they must have been fantastically beyond us in science."

Stanton, whose mind had been concerned with nuclear means of destroying the monster, asked:

"Do you believe we should just let him alone? Just let him lie in that vault till his energy runs out? That would

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mean closing the jetty and keeping everyone away. To do it, we are compelled to stay near here."

"Just that." Leda's voice was faint. "I must sleep. He drained as much as he dared from me. He is terribly hungry for power and energy. Keep people away." Her eyes closed.

Stanton paced for hours, watching over her. Then he went outside and posted "No Trespassing" signs to bar the jetty to fishermen and the curious. The contractor was finished and no one should come this way now but the fishermen. Leda had come in contact with something so titanically dreadful that Stanton feared it might well upset the delicate balance of her mind, and he was well aware that Atan would seek them out for vengeance if they failed him and he yet gained his freedom. Not a pleasant prospect.

The sound of the sea was like the hissing of serpents as the tide turned, and Stanton's mind began to work on the problem of how the Ethne, whoever they had been, ever imprisoned so mighty a creature as Atan. And where had they gone with all their science? Were they the unnameable legends of days long gone? All the races of men told of mighty creatures of the dim past, and all of them held some sort of race-memory of the evil serpent, chained in a "hell" by entities of radiance. In his own Christian belief it was Lucifer, the Light of Heaven, who fell through pride. Was this horror out beyond the breakers the true basis of the legends? Stanton felt a little shiver run down his back as he looked out toward the sea. If the eternal grave of Atan was opened, even in an effort to destroy him, that evil might be let loose on the world again, and who knew what would ensue.

At last, Stanton felt exhaustion creeping over him and went indoors, to look at the frail figure of his wife lying on the bed. Leda had contained an evil spirit for an hour or more, and been exhausted by her experience, yet still could fight against it. As he himself had found the strength to joust with Atan. Where did humans get such resistance? At this moment, he would have run screaming if he faced the incarnate evil. Yet Leda and Stanton held the keys to the situation and no one would believe them if they tried to explain what

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had occurred. Just as long as no one else went to the jetty, the world was reasonably safe. He sighed and slept.

Dawn showed the seawall empty of life and Leda with some of her vitality regained. Over an early breakfast, they spoke of what must be done. Quietly, Leda made her point that they must keep their rendezvous with Atan. Only by making him use his energy could he be rendered harmless and only in Leda had he found a vessel to contain him for the expenditure of that energy. Stanton's last desperate proposal that they go away from the area met a firm refusal:

"No, dear, someone else would go out there and Atan would search and wait patiently till he found what he wanted. You and I have all we desire of this world. What if someone who yearned for power came to know Atan and yielded what he wants so badly? Darling, Atan said we had no weapon powerful enough to fight him, yet I think he was wrong." She hesitated, looking into his eyes. "May I tell you a sort of dream I had in the night?"

Stanton nodded, and Leda spoke slowly:

"Yesterday, I sensed that we were not completely alone on the seawall. It was nothing tangible, yet I felt it. Last night, I dreamed of a great sword of flame, wielded by some hand whose brilliance outshone even Atan's conception of himself. I cannot name it, yet it is there."

"And what weapon comes to your mind?" Stanton spoke with a quiet wonder.

"The knowledge that Atan can offer us nothing better than we already have. In that our power exceeds his. I think it is time to go meet him."

The whole length of the seawall was silent except for the breaking surf. Too silent, in Stanton's opinion. There was something disquieting in Atan's absence. If he was as eager to obtain their cooperation as he had seemed the day before, he should be reaching out to Leda's mind. Only when they reached the end of the jetty and saw the bodies of the two fishermen did Stanton know why Atan was not making himself evident.

There was no mark on the bodies of any violence and the man considered the circumstances. He could forecast the excitement that would follow this discovery. The police visiting the scene, the curious following, and even the dis-

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comfort and endless questioning of Leda and himself. Atan would be waiting for all that. Waiting to drain more energy out of the minds as they came, perhaps feeding slowly till he had enough to break his bonds alone. The humans could not even know what shackles held him and, remembering Atan as the Father of Deceit in legends, it was obvious he would work on the superstitious and credulous till he won freedom. Without a further scruple, Stanton rolled the dead bodies into the tossing water, then led his wife from the scene.

They sat on the porch that evening after Stanton had put up a barrier to keep other unfortunates from death out on the haunted seawall. A harried police sergeant, making a routine check after the finding of two fishermen's bodies out in the bay, came to ask if the Stantons had seen anyone on the jetty. Stanton lied quietly, but expressed regret if the men had been swept off the seawall and offered to bar any more of the rash. His offer was accepted and the barrier came into being.

A chill wind sprang up after darkness fell and Leda shook with premonition:

"Dearest, I feel that Atan sated himself on those poor men. And then when we went to meet him he was lying drunk with satisfaction down in his grave. Like a vampire thing out of the olden days, waiting to drain vitality instead of blood from his victims. Darling, we must wear him down somehow. I only hope we find the way before —John, he—" Her voice changed and the new tone grated on Stanton's ears:

"Liar. Tree ape. To try and deceive me, Atan, that day was night. Fool, did you think I would not discover your deception? I took the life force of the other animals but before I did, one of them gave me a glimpse of what I wanted. A glimpse of the sun. Now I will be free."

"Liar yourself." Stanton kept his voice steady. The idea of Atan gaining strength was horrible, yet the only way to win over this creature was by craft. "I know you killed those men this morning. You could not even keep faith with me till we talked again. And you lie about seeing the sun. I was awake at dawn and the seawall was empty. You had already drunk up their lives and gone back to your grave. As far as I am concerned, you can go back to that hell of yours and stay there. Your

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own hell, Atan, the one that has held you safe for one hundred thousand years. You cannot get out of it without my help. Or you can sit here and amuse me with your idle threats. I closed the way to the seawall so no more of my people can reach it. That cuts you off from life energy. Very sad."

"I can wreck this mind I occupy," Atan threatened.

"Bluster and lies." Stanton was calm. "We spoke of your weakness after you left us yesterday. You could not force my wife to open her eyes. And the same argument still holds. If you wreck her mind, where can you get another? Go back to hell, Atan."

A moment or two passed while Stanton resolutely kept himself from looking at Leda. He sensed the straining in her and then Atan spoke again, in a different tone:

"Stanton, only you know my weakness. I destroyed those stupid creatures by terror, and took their life energy as it left their bodies, but you know this, do you not?"

"I do. That is why I have arranged to have you kept from contact with others. Nor can you persuade my wife to help you if you fail with me. We both know that."

"Stanton, I can offer you every desire of your life if you help me escape. Is it gold you wish, Stanton? I can give you more gold than you dream exists."

"I need no gold." Stanton was curt.

"Women, perhaps. Mates fairer by far than this mate you now possess. As many as you wish of the kind who can gratify every desire you have ever known. All the fairest shall be yours."

"No."

"Power, then. You shall rule all men. All the nations of the world shall bow before the name of Stanton. I, Atan, do promise this shall be."

Stanton said simply:

"No."

Atan fairly convulsed as he shrieked:

"Tree ape, what do you want?"

Stanton merely laughed:

"Perhaps the true story of why you were placed in your grave, Atan. The truth, not a warmed-over lie of your self-glory." He could sense that Atan was laboring to answer and the voice had traces of exhaustion in it, unrecognized as yet because the passion-ridden creature was too absorbed to notice.

"I am Atan." The voice became vibrant in its self-glory.

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"I was the greatest creation of the Ethne. They were dark, but I was light itself."

"A lie." Stanton answered. "They were not dark."

"Man, do not tempt my wrath too far. I was the brightest of them all. Beside my glory, they were dark. I was made that way by the Ethne themselves, long after their own Creator vanished. I was made of solar energy and light. Those others of the Ethne were more nearly material. For long and long I showed the way to knowledge because I was brightest. Great was my fame and many there were who followed me."

"But not all, I am sure."

"No." The absorbed Atan had contempt in his voice. "There were those who withdrew from me when I was glorious. Left and sought the old knowledge of the Creator. It was not the Ethne who overcame me, it was the knowledge of the Creator. He alone could furnish the sword of flame that drove me from the light and power of the world to the Vault."

Inside Stanton's mind, something seemed to come into place. A strong, comforting thing, that brought memories of his early years and the lessons he had learned. Remembering, he spoke:

"And Michael led them."

A mighty convulsion racked Leda's body:

"Creature, you speak of things you could not know, unless—" The voice died away gasping.

Then Stanton's own voice answered, but not Stanton. In his stead, there came a golden resonance to which he listened in amazement:

"And Atan and all his hosts were driven from the light of Heaven down to Hell where indeed he perishes at the end of time. The others were not of the imperishable stuff of which you were made, were they, Atan? So in time they died and you were left alone in your grave. In silence and darkness, Atan, to the people of this world called Satan. The embodiment of all the evil of all the days. The spirit of the night that creeps into the mind of man to tempt him to his ruin. Tempts him from the path of virtue and then deserts him so you can enjoy even the misery of your own slaves. Atan, your race is nearly ended. No longer shall you creep about in your dreams to corrupt the minds of sick men and delude them into believing themselves divinely appointed to rule others. Down in your

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lightless cavern below the heaving seas, Atan, how often have you sought out a weak man and brought war and desolation upon this world? You have dreamed of war and destruction, Atan, dreamed of horror and the ruin of the innocent till you corrupted many of this race. But always the evil wanes and truth lives again. You could always gain your end, Atan, till you came upon the incorruptible such as these two. And then your triumph crashed into dust. Is it not so, Atan?"

A weak gasping answered him:

"Michael, it is you again. Will you never cease to be?"

"Not till your end, Atan, and that is not far off now. Go back to your grave, and know I am on guard here. No matter if you offered these the Rule of Heaven, you could not win release. Go, I say, your power is exhausted."

The voice ceased speaking and Stanton realized the evil aura of Atan was gone. Instead, a nimbus of glory seemed to bathe him as he sat silent, knowing it was not yet over. A moment more and Leda spoke weakly:

"John, are you here?"

"He is, Leda. He lives and will live in peace with you again in this house. I wish to speak first, then I will go." There was a pause, and Michael spoke again. "Because of the wisdom and restraint you have shown, your days shall be full of peace. This much I tell you. Atan will have less effect than in the days of old. One more thing I tell you and I must return whence I came. To you shall be born a child. A man child. Seek him without fear, and fear not for him, for he shall share your peace. This I, Michael, promise."

The nimbus faded and Stanton gasped out:

"Leda, you heard that?"

"Yes." Leda sought his arms in the darkness. "Darling, we heard the riddle of Lucifer told in plain words. John, he was a robot. Atan, I mean. A rebellious robot. Michael—?"

"The Angel of the Lord. The Faithful One. The Strong Arm of God left to guard the Gate of Heaven. Actually, with all due respect to a very powerful and virtuous gentleman, another robot."

They held each other shakily, knowing they had stood in close proximity to the essence of both evil and good, and seen evil defeated. Defeated by infinite power and

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majesty. Then, with the horror of the hours past fading from their minds, a quiet sea sighed again at the turning tide and Stanton spoke, tenderly:

"The weapon of faith and love has more power than all the mechanical devices ever created or to be created. I think I am blessed with the best of wives, darling, but I am chilled. Suppose we have some coffee, and then—" His voice was touched with a trace of happy anticipation.

"And in time we shall name him Michael." Leda finished.

From some far-off place, they could have sworn a voice spoke softly:

"Of course."

THE END

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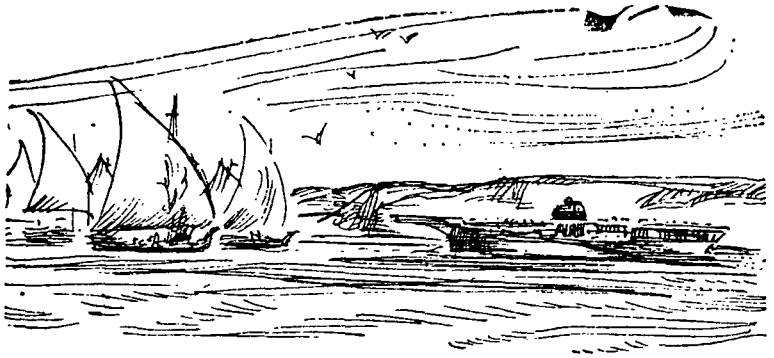
ΤΤΛΟΙΟΝ ΧΑΙΡΕ!

By JACK SHARKEY



If you can't understand the title of this story, don't worry.... We're not sure we understand the story.

I DON'T know whose idea the camouflage was. Probably some desk-pounder back in D. C. who was hipped on MacBeth and the sneaky way MacDuff's cohorts approached Dunsinane, but whatever the instigation, the *Appomattox,* a carrier with a crew of nearly three thousand hands,

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was floating at anchor just off the coast of Greece painted a bilious pied-pattern of yellows, greens and browns, and even trailing rock-hued canvas from the edge of her flight deck to the surface of the glassy blue sea. We were supposed to look like an island. Personally, we looked like nothing more than a cluttered-up carrier, and, as I pointed out to some of my fellow crewmen, our *biggest* danger was from the air, from which point our silhouette gave us away like a neon sign saying "Bombs away!"

I'm not much in rank—Theophilus Rogers, Seaman 2nd Class (though my buddies call me "Jolly" for reasons which if I have to explain them to you, you wouldn't understand anyhow)—but, even though anyone less than an officer—which is the nearest thing to canonization while one is still alive—is not supposed to do any thinking, I found myself using my brain fast and furious when the radar shack started smoking.

"Fire!" I thought. My mind galloped through a small fantasy involving lowering the boats, dodging the shrapnel when the bombs in the hold started blamming, or possibly just diving in and taking my chances on swimming to shore. But that's when everything went off the horizontal, and I found that my main concern was just keeping my balance, which I did by clasping the starboard rail until I expected the metal to ooze up between my fingers like toothpaste. It was the damnedest feeling. I couldn't believe what was happening.

See, *we* didn't tilt, not really. I mean, the horizon was still paralleling the deck, and none of the stacked ammo in the gun placements rolled down the deck, nor did we commence sliding stern-first down the sheet of water on which we floated, even though it seemed to be suddenly on the vertical. The nearest I've ever come to it is when I'm at a movie and the picture on the screen, because the camera has tilted ninety degrees to the side, suddenly tips till it is sideways, and I have to tip my head in the same direction to see everything in its proper relationship to me. When I've done this, of course, the picture is once again related to the position of my head, and "up" seems to be in the same direction my forehead is from my eyes, only my semicircular canals are telling me that

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"up" is in the direction of my topside ear.

Well, that's the feeling I got. That we *all* got. We just *knew,* that's all, that "up" was toward the bow, even if all nature seemed to be in its proper place. The sensation must have lasted maybe five minutes or so, then everything felt as though it was settling back into place again, and the lateral-type vertigo went away.

I was about to dismiss it as an end-product of taking too much chipped beef on toast at the noon meal and get back to my worries about the fire at sea, but at this moment I saw the captain approaching me. Ordinarily, his official position is enough to wipe the slate clean in my mind till I see what he wants, but this time his *physical* position had a lot to do with it. He was on his hands and knees, creeping along the deck toward me like a badly-trained commando.

"Sir?" I said, helpfully.

"Rogers . . ." he said, in a husky, weak voice, "what's happened? Why don't we fall?"

He always called me Rogers, not Seaman or Sailor, at least since we hit the Mediterranean and he found out I spoke a fair amount of classical Greek. He seemed to find me invaluable in dealing with the pro-Democratic guerillas ashore whenever we found it necessary to land a boat to get back pilots who ran out of fuel before they made rendezvous with the ship and had had to bail out into the Grecian hills.

"I don't know, sir," I said in all honesty. "I thought it was noon chow acting up."

"Maybe—" his face was a queasy gray as he struggled to his feet, using the rail for support, "maybe that's all it was, hey?"

"Probably, sir," I said, in a convincing tone that didn't match my inner convictions.

"Sail ho!" cried the lookout, all at once.

"Sail ho?" echoed the captain, in exasperation. Captain Blicks was a sworn foe of Conrad and Melville, asserting that their romantic notions of life on the bounding main had ruined many a man for the realistic, strictly-business approach necessary for existence in the modern-day navy. "What's with this 'Sail ho!' talk?"

Before he could rout out the lookout and start some sort of court martial proceedings, I gently—and a little insubordinately—took him by

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the arm and pointed off toward the horizon, where, indeed, a sail was to be seen. And even as I made my gesture, another and another appeared there, until the entire horizon was a strip of serrated canvas.

Captain Blicks turned to me, wide-eyed. "A fishing fleet?" he said, in some bewilderment.

"If you'll excuse me, sir—" I said, and bridged my fingers over my eyes, scanning the approaching fleet in the shade afforded by my hands. "It— It seems to be, sir." I replied, slowly. "I think I see the sunlight gleaming on their catch. The boats must be crammed *full* of fish!"

Then I looked again, and my hands dropped to my sides, my jaw following suit as far as my trachea would let it.

"What is it, man? Speak up!" said Captain Blicks.

"It's not *fish* I saw gleaming sir," I said, my tongue almost refusing to work. "It's *armor!* The men on those boats are helmeted and breastplated in *armor!*"

"Yipe!" said Captain Blicks, adding in the next instant, "Battle stations! Everyone to battle stations!"

The deck was awash in seconds with dungareed men, all dashing to their posts. My own station was in the radio shack, the same locale wherein the fire— I'd almost forgotten the fire by this time— had broken out, but I still didn't move. "Sir," I pointed out delicately, "they don't seem to be armed for modern warfare. Hadn't we better hold our fire until we see what they want?"

"Impossible," said Captain Blicks. "If they get much nearer, we won't be able to use the 16-inchers on them without endangering ourselves."

"Wait, sir," I said, not quite knowing what prompted this or my previous insubordination. "Let me take a boat out to meet them. There's something— Well, I don't think we'd better open fire until I talk to them."

"You think they're Greek?" asked Captain Blicks.

"I'm almost *afraid* they are, sir," I answered, pushing an erupting premonition back into my subconscious mind. "Let me talk to them, sir, please."

Ordinarily, I'd have been in the brig about three exchanges back in this dialogue, but there was something about the day that precluded ordinary behavior. The cap-

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tain, after passing a hand shakily over his eyes, straightened up and gave his consent. I requisitioned Tom Blaney and Jake Garth as my oarsmen—I owed them money, so they couldn't say no—and we lowered a boat and headed for the lead ship of the fast-nearing fleet.

I took a rifle and some extra clips along, just in case.

"Hail, friend!" I greeked toward the first boat, from a distance of about a hundred yards, trying to ignore the shoulder-to-shoulder cluster of bowmen, arrows nocked, along the prow rails of the wooden craft.

"What manner of men are you?" called out a tall, dark-tanned man, removing his helmet and tossing curly brown hair, short-clipped, in the hot yellow sunlight.

"Men of peace," I replied carefully, "fearing lest we have angered some great power which has now come across the endless seas to destroy us."

"Be thou of Ilium?" the man called back, unsheathing a gleaming short sword, as though to signal the archers to let fly with their arrows.

"We be the men of *Appomattox*, yon floating island, great king," I answered, gesturing back toward our ship, bobbing ever so slightly behind its canvas skirt.

The man shaded his eyes and gazed toward the ship.

"I have not heard tell of this island," he said, finally.

"We come from a far-off land," I shouted back. "Myself, and the other men of the *Appomattox*, are under an enchantment, doomed to ride the seas until peace comes upon the Earth."

"That is indeed a long enchantment," the man replied, something of pity creeping into his voice. "By what name are you known?"

"Theophilus" I called back. "And to whom do I have the honor of speaking, noble king?"

"No king am I," he said, a little wistfully, it seemed to me, "but a mere warrior, going forth to avenge our great and good King Menelaus of Sparta. I am called Achilles."

"That's what I was afraid of," I muttered in English.

"Whadeesay, huh, whadeesay?" Jake and Tom chorused behind me. I waved them quiet with a dog-petting motion of my hand, and called back in Greek. "Of your fame we have heard much, great Achilles, most fearless of warriors, most brave on the battlefield, most powerful of

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arms, most noble of purpose—" I went on in this vein for awhile, hoping that, if I knew my Iliad, Achilles, with the disposition of a spoilt child, would swallow it without gagging. After about a five-minute eulogy that made the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* sound like veiled threats, I got a little dry, and had to stop.

"I wish you swift release from your enchantment," he said politely.

"And I wish you good luck in your quest," I replied, raising my hand at arm's length, palm toward Achilles, in a gesture of farewell.

"Perhaps you would care to devote your time to aiding the men of Sparta in their quest for the beautiful Helen?" he said, amicably enough, but that short sword was still unsheathed, and the arrows hadn't un-nocked any.

"Fain would I, would we *all*, thou prince of men," I replied, "but you know these damned enchantments. We can't go too far from our island without incurring the wrath of Poseidon."

Achilles nodded in slow comprehension. He was 99 44/100% enchanted himself, after that quick dip in the Styx. "I understand," he called, with a merry wave, sheathing the sword while thirty arrows returned to their quivers. "That's the way the catapult cracks, I guess."

"Sorry, and all that," I said.

"What the Underworld?" he shrugged, replacing his helmet.

"Well?" asked Jake.

"Back to the ship," I sighed.

They started rowing, the oars creaking in the locks.

"What've we got ourselves into, anyhow?" asked Tom.

"The Trojan War, I'm afraid," I muttered.

Captain Blicks nodded resignedly when I told him.

"I was afraid of something like this," he said. "While you were out there, I broke radio silence and tried to rouse somebody, anybody. The set's working fine, but it just sits there and buzzes. However—" a bright note crept into his voice, "—Trumbull, the radar tech, thinks he can fix the set, with a little time. Maybe then we can duplicate conditions and get back."

"Maybe," I agreed. "I must say, sir, if you'll pardon my speaking out—"

"Sure, go ahead," he responded.

"—Well, I'm surprised, but quite pleased, that you're not

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having me shipped off to sick bay with a bandaid on my brain."

"You mean," said Captain Blicks, his gray-blue eyes blinking in his leathery, wrinkled face, "you were afraid I wouldn't believe you?"

"Something like that, sir, yes," I admitted.

"Hell, man," he said, "I can believe my own senses, can't I? Didn't I feel that tilt when the radar went blooey? Didn't I see all those obsolete boats bobbing there on the water? Didn't I try to rouse someone with the radio? Hell, where else *could* we be?"

"But sir," I said, wonderingly, "I didn't think you were a student of mythology. How would you recognize the boats for what they were?"

"Gad, son, I'm a student of *Naval History!*" he snapped, with fierce pride. "I'd know that Iliad Armada anywhere."

"Naval History goes back *that* far?" I gasped.

"Great Godfrey, man," he exclaimed, "why do you think it takes so damned *long* to make captain!"

There was a knock on the door of the captain's quarters.

"Come in," said Captain Blicks.

Jake, Tom, and Willy Trumbull, the radar tech, came in, their sea caps in their hands. They looked self-consciously at one another, then Jake spoke up.

"Sir," he said, "sir, we were wondering if—if you might—that is—"

"Oh, come on, come on, spit it out," said Blicks.

"If you'd delay fixing up the radar, sir!" he blurted, in a single quick breath.

Blicks, as startled as I, recovered his composure and when he spoke, his raspy bass was gentle, even fatherly.

"I can only assume you have some sound reason for this request, Seaman Garth?"

"Oh, it's not *me*, sir!" Jake protested, anxiously. "I mean, it *is* me, but not by myself, sir, it's all of us, the crew together, we kind of thought—" his voice faded.

"Hmmm," said Blicks, a dusky scowl overriding his craggy features, "this has the sound of incipient mutiny!"

"Oh, *no* sir!" Jake, Tom and Willy gasped, like a cued vocal trio. Nothing like that!" Jake went on, taking the ball again. "If you say no, sir, then it's okay with us, sir. We were just asking is all."

"I see," said Captain Blicks, peering at the three men from beneath grizzled brows, his eyes glinting. "Then perhaps

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you'll explain why you wish to delay our departure—assuming, of course, that we *can* get back to 1944."

"Well, sir," said Jake, a little more enthusiastically. "All us guys been talking about this here Trojan War, and the guys that know something about it were telling us all about this—er—this *Helen,* sir. *You* know, the most beautiful doll in the world?"

"Aha!" said Blicks, raising his eyebrows, but narrowing his eyes at the same time, in a kind of shrewd comprehension. "And all the men, who haven't been off ship for months—"

"Exactly, sir," said Jake, with great relief. "We'd just like a quick glom, sir. Maybe take a couple of pictures. Nothing *rough,* sir, or nothing. Just a peek, if we can."

Blicks looked at me, his head tilted to one side. "You know, Rogers, the men *have* something there! *I* wouldn't mind a quick 'glom' myself."

"And just think, sir," I said eagerly, "what a picture of Helen of Troy would be worth back in the 20th century! Or even a shot of the wooden horse!"

"Hmmm . . ." said Blicks, thoughtfully, beginning to pace the floor of his cabin, hands clasped behind his umbar region. "It's a ticklish thing, a ticklish thing."

"Helen, sir?" blurted Tom, who was immediately shushed by the rest of us. Blicks ignored his question, and paced some more.

"If only we weren't engaged in fighting a war. The longer we stay away, the more tantamount it is to desertion."

"True, sir," I said, adding slowly, "however— There is *one* small point of protocol . . ."

"Yes, yes?" said Blicks eagerly, halting and watching me.

"Well, sir," I swallowed with difficulty, "for all we know, Willy here can get us back to the same time we *left* 1944, so we wouldn't really have been gone at all by their time."

"And sir—" said Tom, with a rare flash of brilliance, "you don't really have to follow rules from a navy of which the whole country ain't even been discovered yet by Columbus, even, let alone got a government?"

It was labyrinthine, but telling. Captain Blicks' face cleared of all clouds. He radiated sunshine. "*Well,* then!" he said. *Well,* then!"

"Sir?" asked Jake.

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"Tell the engineer to get up a head of steam!" said Captain Blicks, regally. The three men saluted and raced from the room. "Rogers!" said the captain, crooking a finger at me.

I approached, servilely. "Yes, sir?"

He gestured to a 1944 map of the Mediterranean.

"Where the hell is Ilium from here?" he snapped.

We trailed the Spartan Armada from a discreet distance, not because we were afraid of a conflict—we could have sent them in splinters toward the powder blue sky while they were still out of sight behind the horizon—but because my personal knowledge of the location of ancient Ilium embraced a region that ran in a ragged parabola from the heel of the "boot" to the Suez Canal region, including Arabia, the Jordan, and probably, if Blicks hadn't finally halted my wavering finger, Cape Horn, too.

So we trailed the fleet toward Ilium, only deviating from a bee-line course to give wide berth to an island that the Spartan Navy seemed anxious to avoid. If it hadn't been for our height above the water, easily ten times the height of any of the wooden craft, we'd never even have seen the island. Prudent use of binoculars elicited the fact that the island was tenanted by a rather voluptuous gaggle of females, who seemed to be doing nothing but a bad emulation of a can-can, accompanied by their own voices, or so I had to assume, noting the overworked lips and larynxes of this foam-flecked Follies.

"Sirens, sir," I said, turning the binoculars over to Captain Blicks. "Luring on the beach."

"I don't suppose we dare swing closer?" he asked, after a moment.

"Well, sir," I said, "it'll involve issuing about three thousand pairs of wax earplugs and lashing you to the mast."

"Oh, well," he shrugged. "Maybe some other time."

Only one near-battle incident marred our otherwise-peaceful trip. We drew too near the tail of the armada once, and one of the ships swung back to have at us, I guess, and we fired what was intended to be a warning shot, but succeeded in raising a geyser off their oncoming bow that lifted the hapless craft its own height out of the sea and dropped it back mast-first. We surged at full speed

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ahead to pick up survivors—though I had my doubts: that armor looked pretty cumbersome for a swimmer, even a good one—and came upon a swaying figure, middle-aged and balding, his occiput turning pink in the harsh sunlight, who was draped ungraciously across a broken spar, and cursing in beautiful word-images.

Ancient Greek or not, he recognized the function of the life-preserver when we threw it, and clung to it gamely while we hauled him dripping from the swells of the blue sea.

I stood beside Captain Blicks as our captive was led forward, mumbling in his beard and trying to wring the water from his tunic.

"Who are you?" I asked, in Greek.

"Name's Homer," he said, eyeing me suspiciously. "You got the wrong man, son. I'm not a warrior, just a war correspondent."

"Homer the Poet?" I gaped.

"Oh, you've heard of me?" he said, expansively, ceasing his garment-wringing. "Yes, that's who I am."

"But-but," I protested, "I thought you were blind!"

"Blind?" he said, scowling, "where'd you get a crazy idea like that?"

I almost told him, but then re-phrased my answer to: "One has heard reference made to 'Blind Homer', sitting 'midst the dinner guests telling his tales of love and war . . ."

"Oh, *that!*" he chuckled. "Hey, that's a good one, son. I take it you've never been to a Greek Orgy."

"Not— Not recently," I admitted.

"I could tell," he said, closing one eye wisely. "Son, at one o' them orgies, *everybody's* blind by the time dinner's over!"

I relayed all of this to Captain Blicks, who had been standing impatiently at my side. He shrugged and suggested we wait until Homer had a dry set of dungarees on him before continuing further diplomatic questioning.

"In the meantime . . ." he said to me, then turned to his wheelman, who'd left his post —along with everybody else on board—to watch the interview, and said, "Damn it, full speed ahead, man! Don't lose sight of that armada!"

Everybody scuttled back where they belonged, and the chase was taken up again.

"No, Rogers, that would never do," Captain Blicks shook his gray head, that eve-

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ning in his cabin. I had suggested that we send a few planes on a straight course ahead of the Spartan Fleet, to perhaps pinpoint Ilium and save us this tiresome tracking.

"Nope," he reiterated. "One sight of a fighter plane roaring over those Greeks, and they'll forget Helen, Sparta and good King Menelaus and spread out so far they'll found a thousand new empires."

"Not to mention calling off the entire Trojan War," I said. "Thereby ruining thousands of future poetic allusions to the beauties of Helen, Greeks bearing gifts, golden apples, and Achilles' heels."

"We'd best be on our guard," Blicks agreed. "One false move by any of us may change the course of history!"

"Considering that we popped back here from the middle of a global war, sir," I said respectfully, "that might not be the *worst* thing that could happen."

"Damn it, *that's* a good point, too," said Captain Blicks. "What to do? What to do?"

"How about we just sort of do what comes naturally, sir, and just hope for the best?" I suggested. "I mean, since there's no way of telling whether our interference will be good or bad for the future."

"I guess we have no other choice," said Captain Blicks. "Soon, very soon, history will be made."

I didn't point out that with or without the *Appomattox*, history would *still* have been made. One Helen is worth a thousand carriers.

"Lo!" said Homer, standing on the bridge beside me and Captain Blicks. "Yon gleam the topless towers of Ilium!"

And yon they gleamed, all right, though they didn't seem tall enough to warrant the appellation "topless." I put this puzzle to Homer as a question.

"Simple, son," he explained. "Labor disputes. Workmen walked off the job, never finished 'em. They got no tops to 'em at all."

"Oh," I said, greatly disappointed.

"Pure hell when it rains," he added.

The mile-distant beach was a jumble of tents, chariots, horses and armor. Up the slope from the beach was a wide, grassy plain, and beyond that the gates—closed, of course—of Troy, ancient Ilium. Somewhere within that bleak stone fortress lan-

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guished the most beautiful woman in the world. Languished for her lover, who had to leave her side to fight this pesky war.

"Things," said Captain Blicks, despondently, "just don't seem as *classical*, somehow, as I'd hoped they'd be."

"I know what you mean, sir," I sighed. "Ten to one, if we get a 'glom' at Helen, she'll be singing, 'The Last Time I Saw Paris', if not 'The Hutsut Song'!"

Homer shrugged. "People are people, son," he pointed out gently. "Oh, antiquity lends some gloss, some glamor, to them, but you always find that they act just like other people. Trouble is, history only records the weighty, more pungent parts of their conversations, and we get a rather false picture of them. They can't talk like that *all* the time! Can you imagine history if everything was set down? At some time in everyone's life, they've all said pret-ty mundane things. How'd you like to hear famous figures quoted as saying, 'Doctor, how can I get rid of ugly pimples?' or 'It musta been something I et' or 'I gotta go potty!'?"

"Stop!" I cried, lapsing into English, but he interpreted the tone of my voice and stopped.

"Whadeesay?" asked Captain Blicks.

"Small talk, sir," I muttered.

We anchored only a few hundred yards from shore, the rocky cove having a fortunately deep draft, and just floated there, watching the campfires springing into life as the hot sun vanished over the horizon.

"Think they'll send someone out to investigate us, sir?" I said, curiously.

"Not after that last investigation," said Captain Blicks, thumbing at Homer. "Hell, our presence will probably force the attack on Ilium, if only because that direction is away from us. If my poetic memory serves me, there are still nine hundred ninety-nine ships we haven't sunk that don't want to tempt the power of our 16-inchers." He chuckled, "They probably think we're *gods*, or something . . ."

I noticed frenzied activity on the beach, and a memory from ancient history class at P.S. 9 in uptown Manhattan stirred in my brain.

"Sir!" I said abruptly. "Those aren't campfires! They're the bowls of catapults!"

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"What? What's that?" asked Blicks.

At that moment, the catapults began flipping their fiery ammunition in long, comet-like arcs. And not at Troy, either.

Blobs of blue-white Greek Fire spattered on the flight deck of the *Appomattox,* ruining the camouflage job wherever they lighted, and dropping over the rim of the strip in sluggish chunks that set fire to our canvas skirt.

"Well," said Blicks, "they *don't* think we're gods!"

"Or they're all atheists," I said.

Blicks grabbed up the phone. "Fire stations!" he bawled. "Get that burning junk off my ship!"

Asbestosed crews with whipping hoses soon had water-blasted the flame-spurting jellies over the side into the black waters of the cove. But the activity on the beach hadn't ceased by a whit —not around the catapults.

"Captain, sir, I believe they're all reloading," I said nervously. Ancient or not, fire was still hot.

"We'd better give them a blast, then," he said.

"At *this* range?" I croaked, envisioning our flight deck suddenly showered with sand, tent-flaps and small shreds of fresh Spartan.

"Just an ammo-blast," he soothed. "No projectile."

He grabbed the phone again, gave the order, and in a few seconds the walls of Ilium, the beach, and the backsides of fleeing catapult-crews were illuminated by a fiery blast of three 16-inchers, followed by a sound like the clap of doom. The blast-wave of the big guns, rushing up the beach, created a momentary sandstorm, and blew down quite a few of the tents. One of the airborne tents tore off its pegs to reveal an armorless Achilles, caught in a position reminiscent of Rodin's *"Le Penseur"*, that is to say, sulking.

"Well," I sighed, "it's too late to save Patroclus, I guess."

"Who?" asked Blicks.

"Long story, sir. Friend of Achilles, went into battle in Achilles' armor, got killed, all the while the hero pouted in his tent."

Suddenly, Homer leaned forward, staring. "Well, will you look at that!" he exclaimed.

I looked. High on the battlements of Ilium, fluttering in the sunset breeze, was a white flag.

"The Trojans—" I said,

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horrified, "they're surrendering!"

"Great Godfrey!" Captain Blicks smacked a hand against his broad forehead. "They think we're part of the Greek Armada. The guns scared the hell out of them!"

"Behold where the gates of Ilium do ope!" said Homer.

I beheld where they oped. They didn't ope for long, just long enough for a small blonde woman to be thrust out, followed by a swiftly tossed bundle of clothing before the portal slammed.

"Helen?" I said to Homer.

"Who else?" he shrugged. "Cassandra?"

I whipped up the binoculars, and, despite the dim light, managed to get a good closeup glance at the face that had launched a thousand ships. It had the Greekest nose I'd ever seen, complicated by close-set eyes and the worst case of acne ever encountered outside a medical journal.

And the blonde hair, I noted with dismay, was an ill-contrived wig.

"*This* is the most beautiful woman in the world?" I choked. It was beyond belief.

Homer nodded. "Sure. *Our* world. The Greek world." He shuddered, slightly. "You ought to see the *rest* of them!"

Captain Blicks, who had grown restless, not understanding a word of our dialogue, grabbed the binoculars from my fingers, nearly throttling me with the lanyard as he did so.

"Helen?" he said eagerly, pointing toward the blonde woman, who was resignedly toting her bundle down toward the beach.

"Yes, sir," I nodded, and as he raised the glasses to his eyes, added tonelessly, "the face that launched a thousand ships!"

He focused on the distant figure, gazed a moment, then slowly took the binoculars from his eyes. "You know," he said thoughtfully, "her face *looks* it!"

"Give up?" asked Homer.

"Might as well," I said. "We'll put you off in a boat. Looks like it's back to 1944 for us."

Homer shrugged. "That's the way the tower topples."

THE END

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HEADS YOU LOSE

There was this dame with two heads, see? And she came to see this doctor; wanted to talk about her love life. What followed makes the average murder mystery dull as day-old dishwater. Judge for yourself.

By GERALD VANCE

THE lady with the two heads really wasn't bad looking once you got accustomed to her.

She had been sitting across my desk from me for some fifteen minutes. I went out and told my office nurse, Jan Marston, to go home "and as soon as I can get rid of that two-headed woman, I'll check my hospital patients."

"Sure, two-headed woman," she flipped back. "If you could conjure up a woman who had a double supply of anything—it wouldn't be heads." She patted me on the cheek, kissed the tip of my nose and walked away, bouncing her pretty little—well, bouncing out the door.

The head on the left was the talkative one. She explained, softly, that the reason the nurse had not seen her was that she had materialized inside my office. "I frighten people," she said.

"Of course you do," I told her in my best bedside manner. "But it is only because you are plural from the neck up, not because you are unattractive. As a matter of fact," I went on, taking in her figure and the trim legs pertly crossed, "you are quite beautiful. Both of you."

"I am singular," she said. "Don't forget that."

I decided to forget it and said, "If I am going to help you, please don't joke with me about materializing."

The face on the left smiled. "Have it your way. The next thing you will tell me is that I have only one head."

"You have two, all right.

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124 "If you want my opinion, you kiss like a slob!"

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But it is merely rare. Not impossible. Animals have been known to be born with two heads many times. In the case of the lower classes of animals—snakes for example—it happens quite often as compared to animals of higher classification like humans. Or a little less in the strata. Double-headed calves are rare, but I have seen one. They die rather young."

"I am four hundred and thirty-nine years old," the left side said. She made it sound like the most natural thing in the world.

I smiled and decided to go along with her. "You don't look a day over twenty-two." I went to her side and offered her a cigarette, and as she took it I watched closely to see which pair of lips would wind up with it.

The left side said, "My people settled in what is now Kentucky, hundreds of years ago. There, on Shadee Mountain I was born. There we still live, some seventy-five of us. The mountain is quite secluded. No one lives there but us."

"So I imagine."

"What did you say?"

"I said I suppose your mother and father and brothers and sisters and cousins and so on all have two heads?"

"Precisely." She snubbed out the cigarette and recrossed her legs.

"Forgetting the age factor, I'll point out where you're wrong," I told her.

"The age factor is easy." The words still came from the one on the left. "We practice the old religion. Our life expectancy is one thousand years on the average."

I wondered what the old religion was but there were other more important things. "What is your name or names?"

The left side again gave me the friendly smile. "I'm Noreen."

"Who's the other one?"

"She's me. Noreen."

"That won't work," I said. "You act independently. As far as I'm concerned, she's Nadeen."

She gave me the smile again. "She's still Noreen. But I won't argue with you."

"But, listen," I continued. "You're all wrong because there is no reason for a race of two-headed persons. I'm a physician and an amateur anthropoligst."

The lady leaned forward and allowed the neck of the soft wool dress she wore to fall open. From the neck

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down, she was normal. She was lush and firm and pink. "There is no *reason* for blue eyes as opposed to brown eyes," she replied. "There is no reason for curly hair as opposed to straight. There is no reason for left handedness. There is no *reason* for persons with double heads. Yet we do exist. My great-grandfather and grandmother were the first. They were brother and sister but they married as it seemed logical. They lived on what is now called the Island of Hawaii and were kicked out for breaking the moral code. They went east in a war canoe. With plenty of food, good winds and the help of Tao, they landed on what is now the coast of California.

"Pursued by Indians, they crossed the great desert of Arizona. They crossed the plains country of Kansas and the Mississippi River. They found a haven on Shadee Mountain and there we were born and have lived."

"And learned to materialize?" I asked, still not believing.

Both heads nodded. "Learned is the exact word," said the lady on the left. "We learned it to survive. In the early days the Indians pursued us. We found that we frightened them just as we frighten the present day people. So like a chameleon learns to blend his color to the background, we learned to be invisible. We also learned the art of self-teleportation. We travel in an instant. We came from Kentucky to your office in a fraction of a second."

It was growing late. While she—they—sat there I called the hospital and had a resident physician check on my patients. I turned back to the lady. "I'm afraid I can guess why you have come to see me."

"Yes," she said with a note of sadness. "I want you to remove one of my heads. I want to leave the mountain forever. I want to live a normal life."

"You won't be able to live a normal life if you expect to remain on earth for six hundred more years," I told her. "That would be too hard to explain."

"I will quit the old religion," she said softly. "I will marry. I will have normal children. I will live forty or fifty more years with the man I love and then I will die with him. I will die with him sooner if I must."

"You will go live with the

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man you love," I echoed. "Does he, too, have—" I cut it off. Those words "two heads" sounded too much like a joke I once heard. "Is he one of your clan?"

"No," she said. "You."

I jumped to my feet, and headed for the liquor cabinet. I poured myself a stiff one and downed it. I said, "Preposterous. I've never seen you before in my life."

"I've watched you many times," said the lady on the left. Her words were so gentle, so full of worship that I turned, startled. I saw a look in the eyes of the left side. The woman was truly in love with me! I poured another drink, downed it. I asked if she'd have one. They both declined.

Noreen said, "I have been to your home. I have sat by your side. I have enjoyed your happinesses and hated your sorrows." Her eyes glanced downward. "I have lain by your side at night."

I shook my head, not believing. Then I was caught by the eyes on the right. They flashed. They shot a lightning bolt at me.

"What's wrong?"

For the first time the right side spoke. "I hate you," it said. "I expect to kill you. Some night when you're asleep, I'll cut your throat."

The left side began sobbing as the right side went on.

"I'm in love too. With a boy on the mountain. A boy of my own kind. I've lain with him, too, and I was visible and he was awake. That is a real love, doctor. That is why I'll kill you. I won't give him up."

"Well," I said, somewhat unnerved. "If I perform this operation, there's no question in my mind as to which head gets the knife."

There was silence as the left side continued to hide her eyes and sob and the right side shot looks of hatred at me. Then the lady with the twin hairdoes slowly faded from my sight. I figured she went back to the mountain.

I worked late that night drafting my report to the American Medical Association. I also drank. I do not know how I got home and neither do I know if I lay with a two-headed woman. I do know that I was alive the next day.

At the office, the nurse Jan gave me a cold stare. "You got drunk. You had a lady in your office and you were so slopped with whiskey you wrote a nightmare report to the American Medical Associ-

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ation. If I had mailed it as you instructed, you would have been defrocked or whatever it is they do to drunken doctors."

"They take away their licenses," I told her. My head splitting with each word. "Thanks for tearing up the report. I thought it was a good gag."

"Not very funny," Jan said. "Who was the woman you had the gay party with in your office?"

"The two-headed woman," I told her. "How did you know she was here?"

"She dropped a couple of handkerchiefs," Jan said sarcastically.

I beat a retreat to the office.

I went to the veterinarian I knew who had purchased the two-headed calf. After it died, he mounted the skeleton. I asked him if I could see it.

"You're the first physician I ever knew who was interested in cows," he said. "Thinking of switching?"

I ignored his wit and studied the calf. The spinal vertebrae were peculiar. At the neck, the column branched and at the branch were twin vertebrae so situated that if a surgeon could tie off the unwanted spinal cord, a severance could be made without difficulty. The calf would not appear a freak if one head had been severed. Like my lady, Noreen, the necks were so constructed that the removal of one head —Nadeen—and a little plastic surgery could obliterate any trace of a second head.

There was a problem in surgery, but not really an acute one. That is, if my patient happened to be constructed as the calf.

I worried about it. I had not seen Two-Heads for a week, but from time to time it seemed as if I felt her presence. In my half-sleep I wondered if she were near me.

The image of her haunted me. The left side of her haunted me pleasantly while the right side sent a chill down my back. That dame could kill. She'd be the death of me if she had her way.

Of course I didn't for an instant plan to do the operation. I was only interested as a surgeon. Could it be done? I found myself making sketches of the two-headed woman. I marked on the diagram exactly how the cut would be made, exactly where the spinal cord would be tied off, the precise spot where the superfluous neck vertebrae would be removed.

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Then she came again.

She materialized before me as I sat at dusk in my office. She wore a powder blue suit, trimly fitted. The hair on both heads was expertly dressed, curled short in the fashion of the day. She had been working on herself, this double dome, and I was flattered that she had worked to please me.

"Where have you been?" I demanded.

"To the Shadee," the right side said pleasantly.

"You sound almost civil," I said. "The last time you were here you wanted to kill me."

She smiled coyly. The left side, my girl-friend Noreen, giggled. "She's been to the mountains with her boy-friend," Noreen said.

"Well so have you," I shouted. "And let me remind you, that this double person business ends at the shoulders.

"Drop dead," said the one on the right and she gave me that carving look of hers. The one on the left purred at me. "Come here."

As I walked to her side, her eyes beheld me as if seeing glory. She was soft with love. It came from her and engulfed me. I shook with it and I fell in love in an instant. I kissed her and knew I was hopelessly trapped.

I took care of that smart alec on the right side that night. I gave her a mickey that put her away till daybreak and the one on the left, my Noreen, laughed in my ear and whispered to me all night.

It wouldn't really be murder, I told myself over and over again.

I fired nurse Jan. She protested that I was out of my mind when I closed my practice. Over her protests, I eased her gently out of the door and closed the building which housed my medical office.

With Noreen invisible at my side, I drove to a little seaport town on the Florida Gulf coast. I rented an out of the way house. I set up a laboratory and made ready for the operation. Noreen (with Nadeen under sedatives most of the time) lived with me in her visible state. We had a hard time coaxing Nadeen to do it, but she agreed to the sedatives and to go independently invisible so things wouldn't look bad to any one who happened to look in on us.

I spent hours running my

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fingers over my love's neck, probing here, knuckling there and making more sketches. Finally all was prepared.

"We'll operate tomorrow night," I said.

To a surgeon, the operation was a dream. Like cutting a piece of cheese. I separated the vertebrae and did some plastic work. I was pretty busy, working alone, but it was a clean job about three hundred stitches and three hours.

Noreen, my love of the left, lay sleeping peacefully in our bed. As I made her comfortable, I figured that two weeks of care would make her better than new. The stitches could be removed and in another week, we'd be married. The worse that could come of it would be that Noreen would have a stiff neck for a week or so.

That's the way I had it figured.

But after I dug a ten-foot hole outside and went back for the head that was Nadeen —*I couldn't find it.* It had vanished.

They arrested us six weeks later as we were driving toward Tucson, Arizona. Laughingly, I explained the whole thing. I had performed an operation on my wife. She had a second head, you see, and I removed it. I showed them the thin traces of the incision and the stitch marks.

They let Noreen go. They took me back to New York.

The police lieutenant asked, "The operation was performed in Florida?"

"It was."

"And where is Nadeen?"

"You mean the part I removed? I don't know."

"We do," the lieutenant said. They showed it to me. She was found in my closed New York medical office. Jan, burgled the joint after I left, led the police to it.

The jury was impossible. A head without a body, they ruled, was still a corpse. The body would be found, they said, some day. Bodies always are.

Every time I think of it, waiting here in this dark cell, I see Nadeen's head with its mocking smile disappearing and then coming back again to its place beside Noreen.

And Noreen, where are you? Back on Shadee Mountain? I'll never know.

They're going to fry me tomorrow.

THE END

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